Micro-Ideologies and Rhetorical Shifts: Understanding Ideological Evolution in Rebel Groups.

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A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Government

University of Essex

April 2025

Acknowledgements

Abstract

This thesis explores the micro-ideological configurations and rhetorical transformations in rebel groups through three interrelated journal-style articles. It examines why and how rebel organisations transform their ideology over time, how rebel groups frame conflicts, define goals, and establish normative constraints resulting in micro-ideologies, and how peace agreement negotiations influence the rhetorical strategies of non-participating rebel groups. The first article investigates the mechanisms of ideological change in rebel groups. Using process tracing, interviews, and archival data analysis of the 19th of April Movement (M-19) in Colombia, it argues that ideology is a dynamic category that evolves through the mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation. Groups within the same ideological family face continuous pressure to distinguish themselves while maintaining legitimacy among internal members and external supporters. The second article examines the micro-ideologies of rebel groups, which emerge from the interaction between conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints. Building on existing literature on ideology in civil wars, the concept of micro-ideologies demonstrates how groups within the same ideological family develop distinct ideological positions. Through interviews, case studies, archival research, and machine learning techniques, specifically supervised classification and cluster analysis, applied to 6,056 documents from 59 guerrilla groups in Latin America, this study empirically establishes that a group's definition of its enemies and its self-representation are the main elements of micro-ideological differentiation. The third article analyses the impact of peace negotiations on the rhetorical transformation of non-participating groups. Using unsupervised Wordfish estimation, the findings suggest that peace negotiations influence the rhetoric of both participating and non-participating groups due to the increased salience of peace. The study also finds that groups with formal political institutions are more likely to moderate their rhetoric, whereas splinter groups tend to radicalise. The findings of this thesis underscore the necessity of unpacking the concept of ideology and understanding it as a dynamic category. By moving beyond broad ideological classifications, this research highlights the importance of a more granular analysis of ideological variations within and across rebel groups.

Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis investigates rebel groups' micro-ideological configurations and rhetorical transformations through three interrelated journal-style articles. It aims to advance our understanding of ideology in rebel groups, moving beyond broad categories and static ideological classifications. Each chapter explores a specific dimension of this broader theme. Despite considerable scholarly attention to ideology in conflict (Ahmadov and Hughes, 2017; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014; Hafez, 2020; Leader-Maynard, 2022; Schwab, 2023; Tokdemir et al., 2021), the literature remains underdeveloped in addressing ideological change and specific ideological positions. This thesis contributes to filling that gap by analysing micro-ideologies, ideological evolution, and rhetorical transformation in rebel groups.

The first article examines why and how rebel organisations transform their ideology over time, moving beyond the more commonly studied post-conflict ideological transformations. The findings of this article emphasise the importance of viewing ideology as an evolving category that changes over time through mechanisms such as legitimisation and differentiation.

The second article introduces the framework of micro-ideologies designed to assess and differentiate the ideological positions of rebel organisations within the same ideological family. It explores how we can observe distinct ideological components within the same ideological family in groups that share a common background, by examining how rebel groups frame

conflicts, define goals, and establish normative constraints, that give rise to micro-ideologies. The findings confirm that micro-ideologies capture the fine-grained ideological distinctions often obscured by broad typologies and are useful for comparing different positions within the same ideological family.

The third article investigates how do peace agreement negotiations influence the rhetorical strategies of non-participating rebel groups, comparing their responses to those of groups participating in the negotiations. It explores the contrasting effects of peace negotiations on rebel groups, including both moderation and radicalisation. The findings show that in multi-actor civil wars during peace negotiations they compete within the same ideological space and transform their rhetoric in response to the salience of peace, internal structural motivations, and external pressures.

As Breslawski and Tucker (2022) note, "most armed groups adhere to some underlying political ideology that shapes their behaviour in a number of ways, including their strategies of warfare, recruitment practices, and governing institutions." (4) This observation presents ideology as a central issue in conflict studies.

I argue that armed groups develop unique internal and external ideological structures to wage conflict. These ideological structures are tailored to recruit members, gain public support, and achieve strategic goals. As Freeden (2003) states, "ideologies are not only produced but consumed, and their consumption is not identical from instance to instance. Ideologies are interpreted and understood by the populations to whom they are directed in many different ways." (47)

From this perspective, the need for a new framework to study ideology in armed groups stems from the distinctive characteristics of these organisations, including cultural constraints and incentives, political demands, objectives, and operational capacities. These factors show the centrality of ideology for armed movements operating in competitive and volatile multi-actor conflict environments.

1.1 Theoretical Argument

The aim of this thesis is to analyse ideology as a dynamic and relational category, shaped by internal debates and external political pressures. While the literature has focused on ideology as a cohesive belief system rooted in broad, stable families such as Marxism or Nationalism, this thesis instead emphasises the fluidity and adaptability of ideological positioning in rebel groups. It does so by examining ideological change over time, the emergence of micro-ideological configurations within broader families, and the influence of peace processes on the rhetoric of non-participant actors.

The study of ideology has been central to political science, sociology, and conflict studies. Disciplines such as discourse analysis and political theory have made significant contributions to understanding the role of ideology in shaping the beliefs and behaviours of political actors and individuals (Georgi, 2023; Laver et al., 2003; Schlichte, 2012). Traditionally, ideology has been conceptualised in cohesive terms and classified into broad categories such as Marxism, Liberalism, Capitalism, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism (Elliott, 2019; Freeden, 2001). Nevertheless, ideologies can differ within the same family, and the dynamics of ideological change and positioning within rebel groups, particularly among those belonging to the same ideological family, are still insufficiently explored. This research builds upon existing scholarship by focusing on how ideologies evolve over time, especially within rebel organisations.

The theoretical foundation of this thesis draws upon broader political science theories of organisational change and discourse analysis. These approaches emphasise that ideologies are fluid constructs that adapt in response to external shocks, internal processes, and changing political opportunities (Druckman et al., 2023; Glauber, 2022; Tokdemir et al., 2021). By integrating these perspectives into the study of insurgent groups, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of ideological evolution in rebellion. It argues that ideological change is not merely a secondary outcome of economic and military incentives, but rather a

deliberate and strategic process through which armed organisations maintain relevance amid evolving political and social contexts.

Ideological families serve as useful broad classifications, offering a general framework to categorise ideological traditions. However, they frequently obscure the internal diversity and transformations within those categories. In large-N studies incorporating ideology, ideology often appears as a fixed umbrella category that groups diverse actors under the same ideological label, limiting the analytical clarity necessary to distinguish meaningful variation.

Discourse analysis approaches understand ideology as a socially constructed and contested concept (Alcalá and Uribe, 2016; Bakiner, 2016; Vaca, 2016). Within this tradition, critical studies provide tools to identify patterns of rhetorical change in political actors. These rhetorical transformations reflect ideological adaptation and are instrumental in shaping how groups engage with external audiences, justify their positions, and maintain legitimacy.

Rhetorical change is understood to function both as a driver and an expression of ideological transformation (Abul-Fottouh and Fetner, 2018; Githens-Mazer, 2012). It shapes how actors articulate their claims and respond to external pressures, including unstable political landscapes and stakeholder expectations (Betancur, 2010; Parkinson, 2021).

Existing literature on ideological change has shown that moderation and radicalisation represent pathways through which groups and individuals recalibrate their positions in response to differing motivations and incentives (English, 2019; Schwab, 2023; Schwedler, 2007; Sindre, 2018). However, while considerable research has been devoted to understanding how participant groups adapt their rhetoric during peace processes (Bell, 2006; Dyrstad et al., 2022), relatively little attention has been paid to the rhetorical strategies employed by non-participating groups.

In recent decades, peace negotiations have emerged as a central instrument for resolving armed conflicts and establishing sustainable peace settlements (Ahmed, 2018; Badran, 2014). As peace becomes a salient political issue during these processes, rebel groups often compete over dominant narratives (Gutiérrez, 2020; Tellez, 2019). In such contexts, rhetorical

positioning around peace can be a strategic means of attracting international attention and public support, offering a compelling incentive to claim issue ownership (Keels and Wiegand, 2020; Lee, 2012; Wildman et al., 2021). The political opportunities and constraints generated by peace processes may, therefore, influence the strategic calculations of both participating and non-participating actors (Fontana et al., 2021; Kovacs, 2017; Phelan, 2018).

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives offer a framework for analysing ideology as a dynamic field of contestation and adaptation. By incorporating the concepts of ideological change, micro-ideological variation, and the spillover effects of peace processes, the thesis moves beyond binary classifications and static categories. It instead advances a more relational and responsive account of ideology, one that captures the complexity of how armed groups negotiate, reshape, and sustain their ideologies over time.

1.2 Key Concepts

The main concept of this research is ideology. I adopt definitions commonly used in conflict studies. Ahmadov and Hughes (2017) define ideology as a "shared framework of mental models that groups of individuals possess that provides both an interpretation of the environment and a prescription as to how that environment should be structured." (3) Likewise, Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2014) describe ideology as a "systematic set of ideas that includes the identification of a referent group, an enunciation of the grievances or challenges that the group confronts, the identification of objectives on behalf of that group, and a programme of action." (215)

According to Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2014), ideology may be used normatively, reflecting a genuine belief in its principles, or instrumentally, as a flexible tool for strategic purposes. Leader-Maynard (2013) further characterises ideologies as "distinctive configurations of political concepts that create specific conceptual patterns from a pool of indeterminate and unlimited combinations" (302). He also highlights the role of ideology in the legitimation

process, an idea echoed by Ishiyama (2019), who underscores its significance in shaping group identity.

In conflict settings, ideology operates as a symbolic marker through which armed groups articulate demands, mobilise support, and compete for legitimacy, especially in multi-actor civil wars, where ideological strategies resemble competition among political parties. Based on these contributions, I define ideology as a systematic set of ideas that shapes group identity, articulate demands, identify adversaries, and set normative thresholds. Ideology facilitates mobilisation and institutional development and is both internalised through organisational socialisation and projected externally to influence audiences.

Micro-Ideologies

In this thesis, I introduce the concept of micro-ideologies, arguing that ideology can be analysed through three dimensions: conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints. This typology builds on the framework proposed by Hafez (2020); Hafez et al. (2022) and allows for a more nuanced categorisation of organisations often grouped under broad ideological labels such as Marxist, Leftist, Nationalist, or Ethnonationalist.

Conflict framing refers to how rebel groups present their struggle, construct identities, and define enemies. It forms the foundation of a group's narrative and evolves to align with political and strategic contexts. Conflict goals capture what a group ultimately seeks to achieve, such as regime change, political inclusion, or territorial control, and reflect both strategic intent and ideological priorities. These goals can change over time, even within the same ideological family, in response to changing conditions.

Normative constraints are the internal and external rules governing the use of violence. These include ideological doctrines, experiences, and international norms that shape how and when violence is employed by rebel groups. Together, these three components interact to form micro-ideologies, which account for the ideological diversity observed within broader ideological families. This framework assumes that ideology is both structured and flexible, offering strategic guidance while remaining responsive to evolving conflict environments.

Ideological Change

Ideological positioning refers to a group's stance on the ideological spectrum, typically understood in terms of values, beliefs, and policies (Brussino et al., 2016; Carroll and Kubo, 2018; van den Broek, 2017). While often used in party politics, this concept can also explain a rebel organisation's ideological identity.

Ideological change refers to how groups revise their ideological stance in response to internal and external pressures. I propose that two mechanisms, legitimisation and differentiation, drive this change. Depending on the context, these mechanisms may lead to either moderation or radicalisation.

Legitimisation involves justifying a group's actions and improving credibility internally and externally (Glauber, 2022). Internally, it fosters cohesion and loyalty; externally, it aligns rhetoric with societal norms to attract allies and gain international recognition. Differentiation is the strategic repositioning of a group to distinguish itself from rivals (Schwab, 2023). This often occurs amid competition from rival groups, whether newly formed or moderate in stance.

Rhetorical Transformation

Rhetorical transformation is a visible dimension of ideological change that can occur without accompanying behavioural change (Albert, 2023; Githens-Mazer, 2012; Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2010). Even when strategically driven, rhetorical transformation signals a group's adaptation to external conditions in pursuit of legitimacy (Geiß, 2022; Willems, 2022).

Rhetorical transformation refers to a change in discourse and public declarations by rebel groups compared with their previous position. This change can be towards more moderate or more radical rhetoric.

1.3   Motivation

Understanding the ideological diversity within rebel groups is necessary for analysing their behaviour, strategies, and overall impact on conflict outcomes (Engeland and Rudolph, 2016; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014). Traditionally, studies of ideology in civil wars have conceptualised rebel organisations as ideologically homogeneous, grouping them under broad labels (Freeden, 2013; Hafez et al., 2022; Schubiger and Zelina, 2017). While these classifications offer valuable insights into general trends, they often obscure the internal variations that shape each group's ideological identity and strategic choices. Although scholars acknowledge the importance of ideology in insurgent movements, fewer have explored how and why ideological positions shift over time (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Franco, 2017; Leader-Maynard, 2013).

To address this gap, I demonstrate how rebel ideologies evolve in response to changing internal and external pressures. This thesis contributes to the broader understanding of ideological adaptation in insurgency by identifying legitimisation and differentiation as mechanisms driving ideological change. In doing so, it enriches ongoing discussions on rebel strategies, ideological positioning, and the complexity of political violence in civil war contexts.

Furthermore, building on existing scholarship that highlights ideological diversity among insurgent movements (Belgioioso and Thurber, 2023; Berti, 2023; Hafez, 2020; Hafez et al., 2022; Schubiger and Zelina, 2017), I introduce the concept of micro-ideologies, a framework for examining the nuanced yet meaningful differences in how rebel groups frame conflict, define objectives, and set normative boundaries. Micro-ideologies offer a more granular lens for understanding ideological configurations within and across ideological families, particularly in multi-actor civil wars. This thesis extends the analysis of ideology by offering a systematic approach to identifying and categorising micro-ideological variation.

For scholars, this framework challenges assumptions of ideological homogeneity and contributes to a more refined understanding of ideological responses in conflict. For policymakers,

it provides an actionable tool for designing targeted peacebuilding efforts, context-specific negotiation strategies, and adaptive counterinsurgency policies tailored to the distinct micro-ideological positions, ideological change, and rhetorical transformation of rebel organisations.

1.4   Research Design

This thesis adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating a qualitative case study of Colombian rebel groups and machine learning analysis of 6,056 documents from 59 Latin American rebel organisations. The qualitative component includes ten semi-structured interviews with former combatants and experts in the Colombian conflict[1] and archival research, while the quantitative component employs supervised and unsupervised machine learning, ideal point estimation measurement via Wordfish method and regression analysis.

   To analyse ideological change, I used process-tracing methodology on a case study of the M-19 rebel organisation in Colombia. The data sources include internal documents provided by former combatants, along with interviews with them and conflict experts, and public materials produced by the group obtained from CEDEMA[2] and the Oiga Hermano, Hermana blog. To ensure robustness, I employed triangulation to cross-verify information across data sources. In addition, I used counterfactual reasoning to assess the necessity and sufficiency of the proposed mechanisms.

   To further explore the structure and diversity of micro-ideologies, I used supervised machine learning to classify 6,056 documents from 59 Latin American rebel organisations and detect ideological trends across time and organisations. I also employed unsupervised clustering techniques to obtain a classification and ideological position within the same ideological family. The combination of these techniques helped to validate the conceptual distinction between broad ideological labels and their internal micro-variations. This computational

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[1]This project has been reviewed and approved on behalf of Subcommittee 3 of the University of Essex: ETH2223-0355.
[2]Centro de Documentación de los Movimientos Armados

analysis reinforces the qualitative findings of the case study and internal documents of rebel organisations in Colombia.

To study rhetorical positioning, I also used Wordfish as an ideal point estimation model, in documents from 20 Latin American rebel organisations from 1980 to 2023. This analysis was conducted on the Ceres High-Performance Computing Cluster[3]. The measurement obtained through Wordfish was then include in the analysis of variance and regression analysis models.

1.5   Data and Case

This research focuses on Latin American rebel groups active between 1959 and 2023. The region provides a compelling context for analysing ideological transformation, as numerous guerrillas have been active for more than 10 year, also peace agreements have been attempted, and rhetorical transformations have significantly influenced political systems. Notable cases, such as the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (D and Thomson, 2020; Lee, 2019; Villamizar, 2020), demonstrate how rebel groups have strategically redefined their ideological positions in response to peace initiatives.

The Colombian Civil War serves as the primary case study to explore ideological change and micro-ideological variation among groups with shared ideological foundations. This conflict offers a particularly rich empirical setting for three main reasons. First, it involves multiple rebel organisations, including the FARC, the National Liberation Army (ELN), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL), and Movement 19th April (M-19), all of which trace their roots to Marxist ideologies. This allows for a focused analysis of ideological divergence within the same ideological family. Second, the protracted nature of the conflict, ongoing since 1964, provides a temporal scope to examine both ideological continuity and transformation. Third, the interactions and rivalries among these groups allow me to understand how rebel

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[3]Ceres comprises 2,192 processors (including multi-threading), 43.5 TB of RAM, 24 GPUs, and 1,080 TB of dedicated storage.

organisations position themselves in relation to one another ideologically.

1.6 Main Findings

The findings confirm that micro-ideologies are dynamic, heterogeneous, and analytically useful. The qualitative analysis of Colombian rebel groups demonstrates that micro-ideologies capture the dimensions of conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints that evolve over time, even within ideologically similar organisations. Despite their shared Marxist foundations, FARC, ELN, and EPL developed distinctly different micro-ideological profiles. FARC exhibited a more flexible approach to military and political engagement; ELN remained ideologically rigid and less adaptive, and EPL transitioned from Maoism to a more peace-oriented stance.

The machine learning analysis supports and scales these findings, uncovering distinct patterns of ideological positioning among Latin American rebel groups. It identified three clusters of micro-ideologies: one marked by radical, peasant-oriented rhetoric and a commitment to armed struggle; another aligned with traditional Marxist-Leninist strategies focused on regime change through dual political-military tactics; and a third characterised by an openness to electoral participation and a discourse centred on social justice and rights. The analysis also revealed that conflict framing, particularly how groups define enemies and represent constituencies, was the most significant differentiator of micro-ideological identity. These findings demonstrate the internal diversity within ideological families and reinforce the value of micro-ideologies as a tool for capturing meaningful ideological variation in armed groups.

This thesis also identifies two mechanisms, legitimisation and differentiation that explain how and why rebel groups adapt their ideologies over time. Legitimisation refers to the process by which insurgent organisations adjust their ideological frameworks to enhance internal cohesion and external credibility. This often responds to political opportunities, societal expectations, and pressures for alignment with broader norms. Differentiation, is

the strategic modification of ideology to distinguish a group from rival factions and political competitors in multi-actor civil wars. While conceptually distinct, these mechanisms are closely interrelated: legitimisation facilitates the acquisition and retention of support, while differentiation enables strategic positioning within a fragmented and competitive insurgent environment.

The case of M-19 illustrates how these mechanisms drive ideological evolution. Throughout its operational history, M-19 redefined its ideological stance in response to critical events such as the 1978 Security Act, the 1985 Palace of Justice siege, and interactions with groups like FARC and ELN. These ideological shifts were not merely reactive but part of a deliberate strategy to expand its support base and assert a unique identity in a crowded insurgent field. This shows the central role of ideology in shaping organisational survival, relevance, and adaptability over time.

This study also finds that peace negotiations influence participating and non-participating rebel groups, particularly through the mechanism of rhetorical transformation. The salience of peace generated by ongoing negotiations exerts pressure on excluded groups to also adjust their rhetoric, often leading to more moderate narratives. Notably, the presence of a political wing correlates strongly with rhetorical moderation, especially in participating groups, suggesting that institutionalised internal structures facilitate ideological and discursive adaptability. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of peace negotiations by showing how their effects extend beyond the immediate negotiating parties, reshaping the discursive landscape of the entire conflict. This chapter provides a novel application of issue salience and issue ownership to the field of conflict studies.

1.7 Overview of the Chapters

Chapter One examines ideological change within armed groups over time. It introduces the mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation to explain these changes, drawing from

political theory, discourse analysis, and organisational studies. Through a case study of the M-19 movement in Colombia, it shows how internal and external pressures shape ideological evolution.

Chapter Two refines the analysis of ideological positioning by introducing the concept of micro-ideologies. Focusing on intra-family ideological variation, it presents a typology based on conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints. This chapter combines qualitative analysis from Colombian rebel groups with computational text analysis of 59 Latin American organisations, revealing how even groups with shared ideological roots diverge in meaningful and measurable ways.

Chapter Three focuses on the rhetorical transformation of rebel groups that are excluded from formal peace negotiations. It explores how the salience of peace as a political issue influences the discursive strategies of participating and non-participating insurgents. Using text analysis and quantitative methods, the chapter expands the scope of peacebuilding analysis by demonstrating that rhetorical adaptation can occur outside the formal negotiation table.

Together, these chapters advance our understanding of ideological adaptation in rebel groups by bridging theoretical contributions with empirical evidence. The thesis contributes to the study of political violence, ideological evolution, and insurgent discourse. For scholars, it offers a framework to dissect the complexities of ideological identity and change. For policymakers, the findings emphasise the importance of accounting for ideological and rhetorical evolution in designing peace processes and post-conflict strategies. Understanding how rebel groups evolve ideologically both in content and in communication can enhance efforts to mitigate conflict and promote sustainable political transitions.

Chapter 2

Understanding Ideological Transformation in Rebel Organisations: Mechanisms and Strategic Shifts

Abstract

Why and how do rebel organisations transform their ideology over time? While existing research has largely focused on economic and organisational factors, less attention has been given to the mechanisms driving ideological evolution, particularly during conflict. I argue that rebel organisations modify their ideology in response to external pressures, making strategic decisions for legitimisation and differentiation. This research adopts a case study approach, employing process tracing to analyse the ideological evolution of the M-19. It contributes to existing theories of ideological positioning by identifying critical junctures in the causal mechanisms that lead to ideological shifts, providing a broader framework for interpreting such changes. [1]

2.1 Introduction

Existing literature on rebel groups has primarily focused on motivations for insurgent participation, the strategic use of violence, and the governance structures established by armed non-state actors (Arjona, 2014; Gates, 2002; Gleditsch and Rudolfsen, 2016; Polo and Gleditsch,

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[1]This chapter is currently under revision for an academic journal at the time of this submission.

2016; Staniland, 2012; Wood, 2010). While scholars recognise the significance of ideology in insurgent movements, much of the existing work treats ideology as static and fixed throughout a conflict (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Franco, 2017; Leader-Maynard, 2013). The dynamic nature of ideological evolution, specifically, how and why rebel groups modify their ideological positions over time, has received comparatively less attention. This study addresses this gap by demonstrating how insurgent ideologies evolve in response to both internal and external pressures, using legitimisation and differentiation as mechanisms to explain these shifts. In doing so, it builds on prior scholarship on rebel strategies and ideological positioning while offering a broader framework for understanding ideological change.

In this research I identify two mechanisms: legitimisation and differentiation that explain how rebel groups adapt their ideologies over time. Legitimisation refers to the process by which rebel organisations modify their ideological frameworks to secure internal cohesion and external credibility. This occurs in response to pressures such as political opportunities and social demands, prompting insurgent groups to make a strategic decision to re-evaluate their ideology. Differentiation, on the other hand, involves the strategic adjustment of ideology to distinguish the group from rival insurgent factions and competing political actors in multiparty civil wars. Although distinct, these mechanisms are interrelated: legitimisation enables a rebel group to gain and maintain support, while differentiation helps it compete and survive in a fragmented and competitive insurgent environment.

The theoretical foundation of this argument draws on broader political science theories of organisational change and discourse analysis, which emphasise that ideologies are fluid and evolve as organisations respond to external shocks, internal dynamics, and shifts in political opportunities (Druckman et al., 2023; Glauber, 2022; Tokdemir et al., 2021). By integrating these theories into the study of rebel groups, this research expands the discussion on ideological evolution in insurgent movements. It demonstrates that ideological change is not merely a by-product of economic and military incentives but a deliberate process that enables insurgent organisations to maintain relevance in changing political and social

contexts.

The analysis employs a qualitative process-tracing approach to examine critical events and decisions within the M-19 rebel organisation in Colombia, tracing the evolution of its ideological positions over time. Data are drawn from a combination of primary sources, including internal documents, interviews with ten former combatants and experts, and public documents produced by the group. [2] The study follows a step-by-step process-tracing methodology, beginning with the identification of M-19's ideological positions over time, followed by an analysis of how critical events, such as the breakup of its alliance with ANAPO, the Security Act, and the Palace of Justice siege, acted as junctures for ideological change. Acknowledging potential biases in these sources, this study applies triangulation techniques to cross-verify the data, ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings. In addition, counterfactual reasoning is employed to test the necessity and sufficiency of the proposed causal mechanisms, exploring whether M-19's ideological shifts would have occurred in the absence of the pressures associated with legitimisation and differentiation.

The findings indicate that the dual need for legitimisation and differentiation was the primary driver of ideological evolution within M-19. Throughout its trajectory, M-19 revised its ideological stance in response to political developments such as the Security Act of 1978, the siege of the Palace of Justice in 1985, and its interactions with rival insurgent groups like FARC and ELN. These shifts enabled the organisation to broaden its support base while maintaining a distinct identity in a highly competitive insurgent landscape. The study demonstrates that these ideological transformations were not merely reactive but part of a strategic effort to navigate both internal and external pressures. This underscores the critical role that ideology plays in sustaining rebel organisations over time.

Although this study focuses on M-19, the mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation have broader applicability to other insurgent movements undergoing ideological transforma-

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[2]The internal documents were obtained from former combatants; a snowball sampling method was used for the interviews. More details about the interviews can be found in the Appendix. The public documents produced by the group were sourced from CEDEMA and the Oiga Hermano, Hermana blog. This project has ethical approval code ETH2223-0355 from the University of Essex Ethics Sub Committee 3.

tions. Similar dynamics can be observed in rebel groups across diverse conflict contexts, where changes in political opportunity structures and competition with other actors drive ideological adaptation. However, as this is a single-case study, the conclusions drawn should be viewed as theory-building rather than theory-testing, laying the groundwork for future comparative research on ideological evolution in insurgent movements.

This research contributes to both scholarly and policy discussions on insurgent groups. Theoretically, it challenges the prevailing view of ideology as a static factor in rebel movements, instead providing a framework for understanding ideology as a dynamic and adaptive element. From a policy perspective, understanding the mechanisms behind ideological change offers practical insights for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. For instance, recognising when an insurgent group is undergoing ideological transformation due to legitimisation pressures can indicate a window of opportunity for negotiation, as the group can be more open to compromise and dialogue. Similarly, identifying differentiation strategies can help policymakers anticipate shifts in rebel alliances and the emergence of splinter groups, enabling more adaptive and informed conflict management strategies. These findings are particularly relevant to international organisations, peace negotiators, and domestic governments engaged in conflict mediation and post-conflict reconstruction.

2.2   Literature Review

Since the 1960s, internal armed conflicts across various countries have involved a diverse range of actors, including paramilitary groups, guerrilla movements, and terrorist organisations (Blattman and Miguel, 2010; Fjelde and Nilsson, 2018; Jentzsch et al., 2015; Kekes, 2017). In the post-Cold War era, scholarly attention to the role of ideology in these conflicts has declined, with a dominant narrative suggesting that modern rebellions are primarily driven by economic motivations (Ahmadov and Hughes, 2017; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014; Kissane and Sitter, 2013). Despite this change, a critical gap remains in the literature:

the role of ideology in the evolution of armed groups. While some scholars emphasise the continued significance of ideological factors in mobilisation and political action (Ahmadov and Hughes, 2017; Shesterinina, 2016; Shesterinina and Livesey, 2024), studies often overlook the dynamic nature of ideological change within rebel organisations.

The role of ideology in explaining conflicts is significant, as symbolic and discursive elements, along with the conditions of action, profoundly shape organisational representations within armed structures (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014; Leader-Maynard, 2014). Ideology plays a fundamental role in political processes due to its historical, philosophical, and rhetorical dimensions, making its attributes "striking, salient, and ineluctable" (Freeden, 2003, 5). To deepen this understanding, Freeden (2013) argues that ideology should be analysed as a dynamic and evolving set of configurations that shape the ideological terrain of political movements over time, rather than as a static or overarching narrative.

Rebel group ideologies can be shaped by various factors, including the educational backgrounds of rebel leaders (Green, 2016; Stewart, 2020), involvement in institutional politics (Arjona, 2017; Staniland, 2012), the use of trusted communication networks (Staniland, 2015), and cultural traits within the group (Villamizar, 2017). Additionally, participation in institutional politics can influence rebel groups' behaviour and ideological positioning, particularly in contexts of sustained political engagement (Tokdemir et al., 2021).

Broadly, the literature on ideological change in rebel groups can be organised around two primary approaches. The first examines the ideological evolution of secessionist movements as they transition from armed struggle to democratic participation. This body of work explores how rebel groups reshape their ideologies to adapt to political inclusion, particularly as they integrate into formal political systems (Ishiyama, 2016; Sindre and Söderström, 2016). Scholars in this tradition also investigate how armed organisations moderate their positions when transforming into political parties, identifying factors that drive these ideological changes (Manning and Smith, 2016; Sindre, 2019). The second approach focuses on rebel movements that participate in democratic elections, particularly Islamic groups, analysing the ideologi-

cal adjustments they make as they balance religious doctrines with the demands of political engagement (Juergensmeyer, 2017; Tezcür, 2009). While both of these frameworks provide valuable insights into post-conflict ideological adaptation, they tend to overlook the ongoing ideological changes that occur within active armed groups during conflict, often treating ideological evolution as a process that unfolds primarily in the aftermath of violence.

The ideological change within secessionist movements transitioning to democratic participation has been explored by scholars such as Sindre and Söderström (2016) and Ishiyama (2016). These studies examine how groups engaged in violent struggles for independence evolve ideologically as they enter electoral politics (Ishiyama, 2019; Manning and Smith, 2016; Sindre, 2019). While this research provides valuable insights into how rebel groups transition from violent rebellion to political integration, it predominantly focuses on post-conflict settings, where violence has ceased and groups seek political legitimacy (Berti, 2022). This emphasis leaves a gap in understanding how ideological changes occur during ongoing armed rebellion, particularly among groups that do not pursue secession but adopt alternative ideological goals within a broader conflict framework.

Similarly, scholars such as Manning and Smith (2016) and Sindre (2019) examine how groups that formerly relied on violence adjust their ideological stances to operate within democratic systems. These studies emphasise the process of moderation, in which armed groups soften their rhetoric and political objectives to adapt to electoral competition and governance structures (Manning, 2004; Manning and Smith, 2016). However, this framework often equates ideological change with moderation, overlooking cases where groups undergo significant ideological evolution without moving towards democratic ideals. For example, the ideological transformation of FARC during its Eighth Conference (Aguilera, 2013; Villamizar, 2017) was driven by a militaristic agenda aimed at enhancing military capacity and territorial control, rather than any shift towards democratic participation.

In contrast, studies on Islamic movements engaging in electoral politics, such as Tezcür (2009)'s analysis of Islamic groups' participation in democratic elections, offer a different per-

spective on ideological change. This body of work often examines how religiously motivated movements navigate the tension between political pragmatism and religious conservatism (Juergensmeyer, 2017). While these studies provide valuable models for understanding the ideological adjustments of religious groups, they remain highly context-specific and do not fully capture the ideological dynamics of non-religious, secular movements.

While existing scholarship on secessionist movements and Islamic groups offers valuable insights into how armed organisations undergo ideological transformations, these studies primarily focus on post-conflict transitions or highly specific contexts. Consequently, they often overlook the ongoing ideological change that occurs during active conflicts, particularly among groups that remain engaged in armed struggle without pursuing secessionist or religious objectives. Moreover, the prevailing emphasis on moderation constrains our understanding of the full spectrum of ideological evolution that rebel groups may experience, including more radical shifts driven by strategic, militaristic, or competitive pressures.

Similarly, the study of ideological positioning in political parties sheds light on how ideological evolution shapes organisational strategies, albeit within the context of democratic competition rather than armed conflict. Research on party ideology explores how political actors navigate the spectrum between moderation and extremism, often balancing electoral strategy with ideological consistency (Böhmelt and Ezrow, 2024; Carroll and Kubo, 2018; Johns, 2010; Johns and Kölln, 2020). A central theme in this literature is how party ideology influences both electoral success and internal party dynamics across different democratic systems (Carroll and Kubo, 2018; Ensley, 2012; Hellström and Nilsson, 2010; Umeda, 2022). In party systems, ideological positioning categorises and differentiates political actors based on their support for progressive or conservative policies, market-driven or state-driven economics, and liberal or authoritarian governance approaches (Carroll and Kubo, 2018; Johns, 2010). It is a crucial factor in shaping how political parties compete, align with voter bases, and frame policies to appeal to specific segments of the electorate. These analyses play a role in understanding party systems, electoral strategies, and the dynamics of political compe-

tition. Additionally, ideological positioning influences voter behaviour, as individuals often align their preferences with parties or candidates whose ideological stances reflect their own.

While much of the existing literature on ideological positioning focuses on political parties, the same theoretical frameworks can be extended to non-state actors, such as rebel groups, which also navigate complex ideological landscapes. Just as political parties adjust their positions in response to electoral pressures and internal dynamics, rebel groups face similar challenges in modifying their ideologies, albeit under different conditions. This study addresses these gaps by examining how rebel groups adapt their ideologies in response to both internal and external pressures during conflict. By integrating insights from organisational theory, political party theory, and discourse analysis, this research provides a more nuanced understanding of ideological evolution in active insurgencies. It explores how rebel groups, such as M-19 in Colombia, employ mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation to navigate ideological change, challenging the notion that such changes occur only in post-conflict scenarios. The following section outlines the theoretical framework that guides this investigation and introduces the case study of M-19, which exemplifies these dynamic ideological processes.

2.3   Ideological Change within Rebel Groups

This research employs an analytical framework centred on two primary mechanisms: legitimisation and differentiation to explain ideological change within rebel groups. These mechanisms illustrate how and why insurgent movements adjust their ideologies in response to internal and external pressures, aiming to maintain relevance, sustain support, and distinguish themselves from other actors in the conflict. This framework traces ideological change over time, highlighting how critical junctures and specific triggers activate these mechanisms.

Ideology in rebel groups is defined as a structured set of beliefs and values that inform and justify their political, social, and military actions (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014).

It guides the group's understanding of its role in the conflict, shapes its objectives, and helps establish a moral rationale for its struggle (Ahmadov and Hughes, 2017; Schubiger and Zelina, 2017). Ideology provides a framework for mobilising support, legitimising violence, and articulating the group's vision for the future (Berti, 2013; Schwab, 2023). For rebel groups, ideology plays a crucial role in maintaining cohesion, motivating members, and communicating with external audiences such as civilians or international allies.

Ideological positioning refers to the specific stance a political party, candidate, or individual takes on the ideological spectrum, typically ranging from left to right, based on their beliefs, values, and policy preferences (Brussino et al., 2016; Carroll and Kubo, 2018; van den Broek, 2017). This positioning reflects views on political, social, economic, and cultural issues, including the role of government in the economy, social equality, individual freedoms, environmental policies, and national security. While primarily used in the study of political parties, this concept can also be applied to identifying the ideological positioning of rebel groups.

Ideological change refers to the process by which a group modifies its belief system or ideological stance in response to shifting internal and external conditions, leading to a new ideological position. I propose that ideological change in rebel groups is driven by two mechanisms: legitimisation and differentiation. As rebel groups adapt to new political opportunities or challenges, legitimisation compels them to adjust their ideology to remain credible and maintain support from both internal members and external audiences. Differentiation, on the other hand, pushes rebel groups to modify their ideology to distinguish themselves from other insurgent groups and political actors, often resulting in shifts in goals and strategies. These mechanisms are activated by specific internal and external pressures, and their interaction can lead to either ideological moderation or radicalisation, depending on the context.

Legitimisation is the process by which rebel groups justify their actions and gain credibility, both internally among their members and externally with wider audiences (Glauber, 2022). For rebel groups, ideological legitimisation is essential for maintaining internal co-

hesion, motivating members, and sustaining loyalty (Glauber, 2022). Externally, it involves adapting the group's rhetoric and ideological stance to align with broader societal values, attract potential allies, and gain recognition from the international community (Glauber, 2022). This mechanism ensures that a group's actions resonate with both internal and external audiences, reinforcing its legitimacy within the conflict.

Critical junctures for legitimisation often include peace negotiations, military defeats, and shifts in international norms towards democracy and human rights (Duran-Martinez, 2015). At these moments, rebel groups may face pressure to alter their ideologies to gain support or political recognition from external actors. Triggers for legitimisation include declining public support, the need to engage in peace processes, or international diplomatic efforts (Guichaoua, 2012). For example, the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) moved away from strict Marxist-Leninism towards democratic confederalism in response to external pressures for legitimacy from both local Kurdish populations and international allies (O'Connor, 2017).

Legitimisation can lead to ideological moderation, as rebel groups soften their rhetoric or adopt more widely accepted principles to gain recognition. The Nepalese Maoists (CPN-M) exemplify this process, transitioning from radical insurgency to democratic politics by redefining themselves to engage with the state and distinguish themselves from traditional communist insurgencies (Ashraf, 2002).

Differentiation is the process by which rebel groups distinguish their ideology and goals from other groups within the same conflict (Schwab, 2023). It is a strategic approach used to establish a unique identity that sets the group apart from rival factions or political organisations, enabling it to appeal to specific constituencies (Schwab, 2023). Ideological differentiation explains how a rebel group positions itself within a competitive landscape, both ideologically and operationally, ensuring its survival and influence in a multiparty civil war environment.

Critical junctures for differentiation typically arise during periods of heightened competition between insurgent factions or political movements, such as the emergence of rival groups

or new political actors. For example, when the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) faced competition from more moderate Tamil political actors, they radicalised their stance to reinforce their identity as defenders of the Tamil population (Sarvananthan, 2018).

Differentiation is triggered by internal factionalism, competition with other rebel groups, or the rise of new political parties that threaten a group's identity or influence. In response, rebel groups may intensify their ideological stance or adopt new ideological components to distinguish themselves from rivals. For example, the FARC defined itself through militarisation during its Seventh Conference to differentiate from more politically oriented guerrilla factions (Leongómez, 2017).

Differentiation can result in either ideological radicalisation or the adoption of distinct ideological positions. For example, the Tupamaros in Uruguay combined ideological differentiation, emphasising urban guerrilla warfare, with legitimisation efforts through media, propaganda, and participation in peace processes. This approach enabled them to develop a distinctive ideology while transitioning into politics (Marchesi, 2014).

This framework highlights the importance of critical junctures, moments of pressure or opportunity, in determining when and how these mechanisms are activated. For rebel groups, critical junctures such as military setbacks, peace negotiations, and changes in international support can compel ideological recalibration. These moments often serve as turning points where groups must choose whether to moderate, radicalise, or adapt their ideology.

Triggers, both internal and external, activate the mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation. Internal triggers include loss of cohesion, factional splits, and leadership changes, while external triggers involve shifts in international diplomacy, public opinion, and the emergence of new political competitors.

Mechanism	Definition	Effect in Ideological Space	Observable Implications
Legitimisation	Adjusting ideology to gain support from internal and external actors	Movement towards dominant norms or centrist position and values to broaden appeal	Public rhetoric changes, peace agreements negotiations rhetoric, increased civilian support, human rights rhetoric
Differentiation	Distinguishing ideology from other groups for competitive advantage	Movement away from competitors positions to create distinct identity and increase the ideological distance	New ideological rhetoric, breaking alliances, distinctive tactics

Table 2.1: Ideological Differentiation and Legitimisation

These two mechanisms often operate simultaneously, creating complex and sometimes contradictory pressures on rebel groups [3]. For example, while legitimisation may push a group towards moderation to gain international recognition, differentiation might compel it to maintain or even intensify its radical stance to preserve its distinct identity. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) exemplifies this dynamic. During the peace process leading to the Good Friday Agreement in 1990, the IRA moderated its ideological stance to gain legitimacy through political negotiations. At the same time, it had to maintain internal cohesion by differentiating itself from more militant factions, ensuring it did not lose its core identity (English, 2019).

The iterative nature of ideological change means that rebel groups continuously reassess their stances in response to evolving pressures. Legitimisation often leads to moderation, as seen with the PKK and the Nepalese Maoists, while differentiation can result in radicalisation, as demonstrated by the LTTE and the FARC. However, ideological change is not necessarily linear; groups may oscillate between moderation and radicalisation, depending on shifting conflict dynamics.

This framework challenges the traditional view that ideological change occurs primarily in

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[3]Table 2.1 has been revised to incorporate the effect on ideological space. In this updated version, each rebel group is placed not only according to its stated ideology, but also in relation to other actors, both the state and rival rebel groups, based on mechanisms of legitimation and differentiation. The table includes a column indicating the effect in ideological space, capturing how groups may shift their ideology over time.

post-conflict scenarios, arguing instead that rebel groups continuously evolve their ideologies during active conflict. The dynamic interplay between legitimisation and differentiation drives these changes, enabling rebel groups to adapt to both internal pressures and the external landscape of war and politics.

Pressure

Re-evaluation

Legitimation   Differentiation

Strategic Decision

Ideological Change
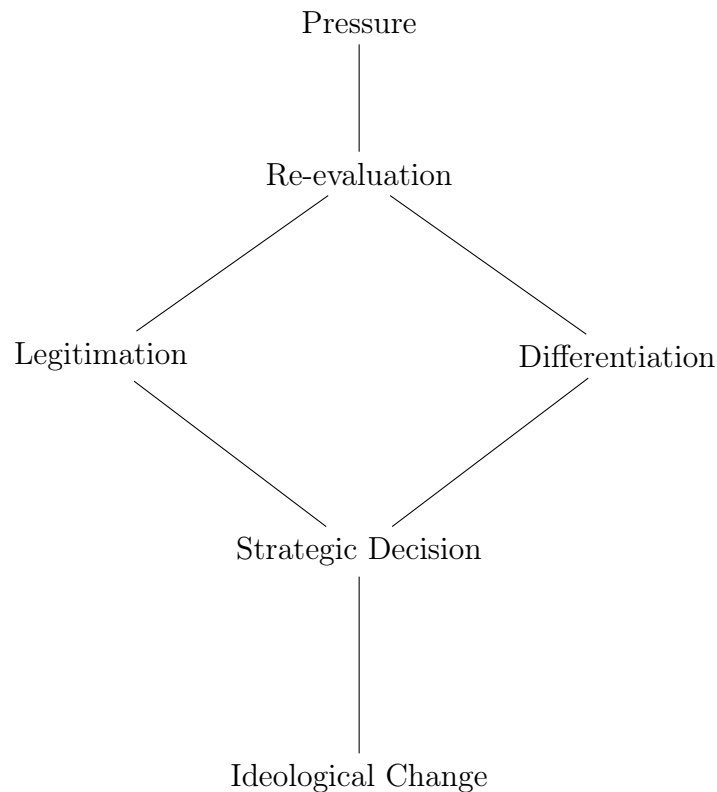
Figure 2.1: Ideological change in rebel groups

The analytical framework underpinning this study conceptualises ideological change in rebel groups as a dynamic and iterative process. As illustrated in Figure 1, this process begins with pressures, such as critical junctures and triggers, which continuously compel insurgent movements to re-evaluate their ideological stance. In response, legitimisation and differentiation guide the direction of ideological adaptation. These two mechanisms, as depicted in the diagram, often operate simultaneously. For example, a rebel group may pursue legitimisation by moderating its ideology to gain external approval while simultaneously differentiating itself from more radical factions to maintain internal cohesion or stand out from competitors. As these mechanisms unfold, they feed into a strategic decision-making pro-

cess, where the group determines how to adjust its ideological stance in response to evolving pressures.

Ultimately, these decisions lead to ideological change, which may take the form of moderation, radicalisation, or the emergence of new ideological positions. This process is iterative, not linear, as groups continuously respond to shifting pressures, reassessing and adjusting their ideologies as the conflict evolves.

By integrating the mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation into the study of rebel group ideology, this framework provides a comprehensive approach to understanding how and why insurgent movements modify their ideological stances during conflict. Through the analysis of critical junctures and triggers, this study highlights the fluid and dynamic nature of ideology within rebel groups, offering a nuanced perspective on how these actors navigate the shifting terrain of civil wars.

While most commonly applied in the study of party competition within democratic contexts, spatial modelling offers a tool for analysing ideological positioning among rebel groups [4]. At its core, spatial theory conceptualises political actors as occupying positions in an ideological space, where preferences and strategies are shaped by proximity to other actors and by the need to appeal to various constituencies (Cox, 1990; Downs, 1957; Hinich and Enelow, 1986; Hinich and Munger, 1994). Traditionally applied in one or two dimensions, such as the economic left–right or the libertarian–authoritarian axis, this approach allows for the modelling of ideological movement over time in response to strategic incentive (MacDonald and Rabinowitz, 2003; McKelvey, 1976).

In adapting this framework to the study of rebel groups, I conceptualise ideological change as a function of two primary mechanisms: legitimation and differentiation. Legitimation refers to the strategic alignment of a group's ideology with the norms and demands of its

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[4]Although spatial modelling is associated with electoral competition among political parties, its conceptual structure can be usefully extended to analyse non-state actors such as rebel groups. Like parties, rebel organisations must continuously navigate pressures to legitimise their positions among supporters and to differentiate themselves from rivals. Spatial frameworks help map these dynamics in a systematic and multidimensional way.

core constituencies, such as peasants, students, and trade unions. Differentiation, on the other hand, involves ideological distancing from rival groups and state actors to maintain a distinct identity. As such, rebel groups may shift toward the ideological centre to gain broader acceptance or move outward to reinforce ideological purity. This spatial model offers a structured framework for understanding how ideological groups evolve over time and across political space, facilitating comparisons across cases and contexts.

2.4 Data and Methodology

This research employs a single case study methodology to examine the ideological evolution of the M-19 guerrilla group in Colombia. The case study method is particularly well-suited for theory-building, as it enables an in-depth exploration of the mechanisms driving ideological change (Lund, 2014). Specifically, process tracing serves as the primary analytical method to unpack the causal mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation, identifying the critical junctures and triggers that shaped M-19's ideological trajectory. This approach is grounded in the theory-building frameworks of Mahoney (2015) and Beach and Pedersen (2013), which emphasise linking the sequence of events to broader theoretical mechanisms.

Process tracing enables a systematic examination of the chain of events, decisions, and external influences that shaped ideological transformations within M-19 between 1974 and 1990. This method provides a structured approach to mapping ideological changes over time by analysing both internal dynamics such as leadership changes, factionalism, and military decisions, and external pressures such as state negotiations, international diplomatic efforts, and shifts in public opinion (Beach, 2017).

In practice, process tracing in this study involves breaking down M-19's ideological evolution into critical phases, each marked by distinct ideological changes. For each phase, the analysis maps the causal pathway linking a trigger and critical juncture to the mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation. For example, M-19's shift towards democratic rhetoric

in the 1980s is traced to declining public support for armed conflict and the opportunities created by the Security Act promoted by the Colombian Government. By focusing on specific events that precipitated ideological change, this method offers a nuanced understanding of how internal and external pressures interact to reshape a rebel group's ideology.

The M-19 guerrilla group was selected as a most-likely case due to its well-documented trajectory of significant ideological transformations, providing an exemplary context for examining the theoretical mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation. The group's shift from a radical revolutionary organisation to a democratic guerrilla and ultimately a legitimate political actor, culminating in its signing of a peace agreement in 1990, makes it a critical case for studying how rebel groups reconfigure their ideologies under pressure (Levy, 2008). As a most-likely case, if these mechanisms do not hold here, they are unlikely to apply to other insurgencies (Levy, 2008).

This study draws on a combination of primary data, including ten in-depth interviews with former combatants and experts, internal documents, and archival materials. The interviews were conducted using snowball sampling, beginning with experts on Colombian guerrillas and expanding to other former members of the guerrilla organisations. This method was necessary due to the challenges of accessing former combatants, but steps were taken to mitigate potential biases by including individuals from diverse organisations and enrolment backgrounds. Interviews are cited in the format RoleYear. [5]

Additionally, internal documents, such as meeting minutes and strategy memos, were obtained from former members and archives, providing insider perspectives on ideological decisions. These documents are cited in the format OrganisationYear. The archival materials include 55 public records, such as speeches, letters, and newsletters from M-19's publications Oiga Hermano Hermana and the Centre of Documentation from Armed Movements (CEDEMA). These sources offer a comprehensive view of M-19's public messaging and its ideological change over time.

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[5]Names were changed to protect the identity of the participants. More information can be found in the Appendix.

This combination of interviews, internal documents, archival materials, autobiographies, and interview books ensures a well-rounded dataset that captures both internal deliberations and external communications related to M-19's ideological transformation.

To ensure the robustness and reliability of the findings, this study employs a triangulation strategy that cross-references multiple data points from different sources (Mahoney, 2015). Triangulation involves comparing insights from interviews with former combatants against internal documents and archival materials. For example, a leadership decision mentioned in an interview is verified by cross-referencing it with minutes from internal meetings. In cases where conflicting evidence arises—such as differing accounts between interviews and public documents—the study explicitly discusses these discrepancies and evaluates the reliability of the sources. This systematic triangulation strengthens confidence in the validity of the causal pathways identified.

In addition to process tracing, this study employs counterfactual analysis to further strengthen its causal claims. By examining alternative scenarios, such as what would have happened if M-19 had not pursued peace negotiations or if its leadership had not shifted towards democratic rhetoric, the analysis tests the necessity and sufficiency of the identified mechanisms. For example, the counterfactual scenario of M-19 rejecting peace negotiations underscores the crucial role of legitimisation in the group's ideological transformation towards political engagement. The use of counterfactual reasoning helps isolate the factors essential to M-19's ideological transformation, enabling the study to make stronger causal claims about the mechanisms driving change.

While M-19 is the focus of this study, its findings contribute to broader theoretical insights on ideological change in rebel organisations. Following the criteria of generalisation, abstraction, and concretisation (Beach and Pedersen, 2013), this case offers lessons applicable to insurgent groups facing similar pressures in different regions. For example, the comparative potential of M-19's experience extends to insurgencies across Latin America, as well as groups in Africa and Southeast Asia, such as the Maoists in India or Hezbollah in Lebanon. These

groups similarly navigate the dual pressures of legitimisation and differentiation, adapting their ideologies in response to both internal demands and external opportunities.

By examining the M-19 guerrilla group, this research enhances the broader understanding of ideological change within rebel organisations. The integration of process tracing, triangulation, and counterfactual analysis provides a comprehensive methodological approach to uncovering the mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation. These findings extend beyond the Colombian context, contributing to a middle-range theory of ideological evolution in insurgent movements globally.

2.5   Case M-19

This section applies the mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation to analyse the ideological transformation of the M-19 guerrilla group in Colombia, testing the analytical framework. Throughout its operational history, M-19 underwent significant ideological shifts, transitioning from a socialist guerrilla organisation to a nationalist and populist group, and ultimately adopting a democratic and peace-oriented ideology (Grabe, 2017; Martel, 2024; O'Connor and Meer, 2021; Villamizar, 2017). By tracing these changes, this study examines how various pressures activate the mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation, shaping the group's ideological evolution.

The M-19 was founded in 1970 and carried out its first public action in 1974. It emerged with a Bolivarian and leftist populist style, significantly differentiating itself from existing guerrilla groups, which were predominantly Marxist in ideology. [6] This new guerrilla movement was composed mainly of young middle-class members from the country's major cities, along with former members of the Colombian Communist Party (PCC), dissidents from the

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[6]During Colombia's Insurgency–Counterinsurgency War, two generations of guerrilla movements emerged. The first generation appeared in the 1960s: the ELN (1964), inspired by Cuban foquismo; the FARC (1966), a peasant communist group; and the EPL (1965), with a pro-China orientation (Grabe, 2018; Villamizar, 2017). A second generation followed in the 1970s and 1980s: the M-19 (1973), the MAQL (1981) with an indigenous agenda, and the PRT (1983) with a labour communist programme (Grabe, 2018; Villamizar, 2017).

FARC, and affiliates of the now defunct National Popular Alliance (ANAPO), a political party founded by former President Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. [7]

The M-19 guerrilla group in Colombia underwent three significant ideological transformations during nearly two decades of armed operations (1970–1990). Initially a socialist movement, M-19 later adopted a nationalist and Bolivarian ideology before evolving into an advocate for armed democracy and, ultimately, a proponent of peace. Each ideological repositioning was shaped by internal re-evaluation and external pressures, illustrating how armed groups, like political entrepreneurs, continuously adapt to survive (Bosi and Porta, 2012).

M-19's ideological transformation can be understood through the legitimisation and differentiation framework, as the movement continuously sought to distinguish itself from other guerrilla groups in Colombia. While first-generation insurgencies, such as the FARC and ELN, adhered rigidly to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, M-19's leadership adopted a more pragmatic, counter-hegemonic discourse, while remaining on the left of the political spectrum. [8] This approach enabled M-19 to appeal to broader constituencies, particularly in urban areas, while maintaining internal cohesion. Each phase of M-19's ideological evolution was driven by the dual need to legitimise its struggle and differentiate its cause from other revolutionary movements, often in response to specific political and social pressures.

In the following analysis, I examine how and why M-19 underwent these ideological transformations, exploring the mechanisms of legitimisation and differentiation that shaped the group's trajectory.

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[7]The National Popular Alliance (ANAPO) (Alianza Nacional Popular) was a Colombian political party founded in 1961 by Gustavo Rojas Pinilla and dissolved in 1998. In the 1970 elections, it became the third largest political force, aiming to challenge the National Front coalition formed by the Conservative and Liberal parties (Melo, 2017).

[8]Former combatants recall that, due to its distinct approach to warfare, M-19 was initially perceived by other guerrilla groups as right wing. However, both its ideological beliefs and internal identity remained firmly rooted in leftist politics (Former Combatant M-19, 2024a).

2.5.1 A New Guerrilla is Born (1970-1973)

The M-19 emerged as an urban guerrilla group, directly linked to the 1970 presidential election (Villamizar, 1995). Initially, it was established as the military branch of ANAPO to denounce electoral fraud in the 1970 elections. M-19 maintained strong ties with socialists, particularly the socialist faction of ANAPO (O'Connor and Meer, 2021; Villamizar, 2017).

This case challenges the conventional theory that rebel groups moderate to form a political party. Instead, some factions of ANAPO underwent radicalisation, supporting the guerrilla group, denouncing electoral fraud, and simultaneously engaging in political competition through María Eugenia Rojas. According to Jaimes-Narváez (2012), ANAPO employed vague socialist rhetoric, which M-19 adopted in its early years, shaping it under the framework of Colombian socialism.

Between 1970 and 1974, according to Grabe (2018, 9), "everyone in M-19 supported socialism. Their new political-military vision derived from the recognition of the oppression and misery in which the Colombian people were mired." The relationship between socialism and communism was a common feature among Colombian guerrilla groups. Within M-19, several founders and commanders had previously been members of FARC and JUCO (Villamizar, 2017). Jaime Bateman, for example, was engaged in urban activities until mid-1972, when he left FARC to establish M-19 (Villamizar, 2019). Other members, such as Iván Marino Ospina and Álvaro Fayad, also had close ties to FARC. However, based on their experiences within FARC, Jaime Bateman rejected its dogmatism and orthodoxy, advocating for a different approach to guerrilla warfare:

> We have been small because the ideology has framed us. It has tied us to the original ideology of the FARC: we have had so many principles, we have imposed so many requirements, that we have not done many things in order not to violate them, so as not to breach them. Moreover, since they have been so many and inviolable, there has been no communication with the masses. (M-19, 1974b)

Jaime Bateman criticised FARC's ideological orthodoxy and its rigid adherence to Marxist principles, arguing that this limited its ability to connect with the broader population. This distinction set the stage for M-19's differentiation from FARC, as M-19 sought to develop a more flexible and pragmatic ideology that would resonate with ordinary Colombians. As M-19's commander, Bateman also criticised FARC for its failure to communicate with the masses, underscoring M-19's legitimisation strategy.

During this phase, M-19 shared certain ideological aspects with other guerrilla groups in Colombia but recognised the need for change. According to a former combatant, M-19 jokingly described itself as a copy of other organisations, stating: "The anthem is the Colombian national one, the flag from ANAPO, and the weapons from the Colombian army" (Former Combatant M-19, 2024b). This realisation fuelled the group's push for ideological transformation. With its initial ideological stance, M-19 sought to distinguish itself from other guerrilla movements and gain legitimacy by forging connections with Colombian history, maintaining proximity to its combatants, and strategically using language and media to communicate its message.

This phase reflects M-19's early legitimisation strategy, as the group sought credibility by advocating popular sovereignty and aligning with ANAPO's socialist faction. Simultaneously, differentiation was crucial: M-19 needed to distinguish itself from the established, rural-based Marxist groups, such as FARC and EPL. By focusing on urban warfare and adopting a more populist rhetoric, M-19 aimed to carve out its own space within Colombia's revolutionary landscape.

Internally, Jaime Bateman's leadership was pivotal in shaping M-19's early differentiation. His departure from FARC stemmed from his rejection of its dogmatic Marxism and rigid hierarchical structures. Bateman envisioned a more flexible, nationalist revolutionary movement, reflecting M-19's early emphasis on building a distinct identity. Externally, M-19 capitalised on public disillusionment with the electoral process to appeal to urban middle-class youth. By targeting this demographic, the group sought to legitimise its cause as a

struggle for political justice, rather than solely a class struggle.

2.5.2   First change: From Socialism to Bolivarian and Nationalist Ideology (1973-1979)

The breakup with ANAPO in 1973 was a critical juncture that placed significant ideological pressure on M-19. The political void left by this fracture forced M-19 to reconsider its identity and platform. ANAPO's support had provided M-19 with a connection to popular socialist rhetoric, but after the split, the group needed to distance itself from ANAPO's political baggage—especially as the party failed to challenge the Colombian political system and its conservative factions rejected M-19 as its military branch (Grabe, 2017).

This period of ideological crisis created an urgent need for M-19 to establish an independent identity. As M-19's first commander, Jaime Bateman reflected on the alliance with ANAPO, stating: "It caused frustration, which generated the political foundation that allowed the development of an organisation like ours and, at the same time, marked the historical downfall of ANAPO" (M-19, 1974b, 2).

In 1974, M-19 launched its military operations, employing strategies that set it apart from first-generation guerrilla groups. According to Álvaro Fayad, the group initiated an expectative propaganda campaign from 13 to 17 January, publishing posters in Colombian newspapers that read: "M-19... Lack of memory? Lack of energy? Wait; it is coming..." (M-19, 1985g). This tactic was inspired by the armed propaganda techniques used by the Tupamaros in Uruguay and the Montoneros in Argentina—urban guerrilla groups that, like M-19, relied on propaganda and mass media to connect with the population. The M-19's propaganda strategy became a central element of its differentiation within Colombia's cycle of war (García-Durán and Grabe, 2018).

The First Conference in 1974 marked a period of introspection for M-19. During this time, internal debates centred on re-evaluating the group's ideological trajectory (Villamizar, 1995). Figures such as Jaime Bateman and Álvaro Fayad advocated for a departure from

dogmatic Marxism, instead proposing a more flexible, nationalist approach (Expert Peace Process, 2023). Discussions at the conference focused on the need to establish a guerrilla movement deeply rooted in Colombian culture and history, ultimately leading to the adoption of Bolivarianism as a core ideological tenet. This shift aimed to reframe M-19 as a uniquely Colombian movement, rather than just another Marxist-socialist or communist insurgency. In Bateman's words:

> The revolution is made for the people. The people are fundamental. That is why we must nationalise the revolution, put it under the feet of Colombia, give it a flavour of pachanga, make it with bambucos, vallenatos, and cumbias [9], and sing it by singing the National Anthem (Lara, 1986, 107).

The second differentiation action marked M-19's transition away from socialist affiliations and the formulation of a nationalist and Bolivarian ideology. On 17 January 1974, M-19 stole the sword of Simón Bolívar, the Liberator of Colombia and other nations, including Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. In a declaration titled "Bolívar, Your Sword Returns to Fight," M-19 proclaimed:

> Bolívar's struggle continues. Bolívar is not dead. His sword slashes the cobwebs of the museum and plunges into the battles of the present. It has come into our hands, into the hands of the people in arms. Furthermore, it is now pointing at those who exploit the people. At the national and foreign masters. At those who locked it up in museums to rust (M-19, 1974b, 1).

The theft of the sword was accompanied by the creation of a new ideological framework within M-19, characterised by a nationalist revolutionary approach. Crucial elements included a call for the nationalisation of the revolution, a rejection of international communist orthodoxy, and a liberation discourse centred on the figure of Simón Bolívar. As Bateman

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[9]Pachanga is a Colombian expression that refers to party; bambucos, vallenatos and cumbias are traditional Colombian musical rhythms

explained: "We (the M-19) are pro-Colombians, our identity is the nation. We dance bambuco, we do not sing The Internationale, we are not Marxist-Leninists. We have nothing against Marxism or Leninism, but that is not what we are." (M-19, 1980c, 2).

Other left-wing guerrilla groups viewed M-19's revolutionary approach with scepticism. According to O'Connor and Meer, their movement was "viewed as pointless attention-seeking and populist by other revolutionaries but was popular with locals" (O'Connor and Meer, 2021, 140).

To legitimise itself in the eyes of the broader Colombian population, M-19 reframed its struggle through the lens of Colombian nationalism, rather than international socialism. The theft of Bolívar's sword in 1974 was not only a symbolic act of defiance but also an effort to align the group with national heroes and symbols that resonated with ordinary Colombians (Expert Peace Process, 2023; Former Combatant M-19, 2024a). By championing Bolivarian ideals and rejecting foreign ideologies like Marxism-Leninism, M-19 sought to embed itself within Colombian identity. This strategy allowed the group to construct a narrative in which they were fighting for the historical and cultural sovereignty of the Colombian people, rather than solely for class struggle.

In a crowded field of leftist insurgencies, M-19 needed to distinguish itself from Marxist-Leninist guerrillas such as FARC and ELN. M-19's urban focus and populist rhetoric, influenced by Jaime Bateman's rejection of rigid Marxist orthodoxy, positioned the group as more adaptable and inclusive. While FARC remained rural and ideologically rigid, M-19's leaders emphasised flexibility and nationalism. This differentiation was central to securing the support of Colombia's urban middle-class youth, intellectuals, and disenfranchised populations, who might have felt alienated by Marxist dogmatism. [10]

M-19's new ideology centred on Bolivarianism and Colombian nationalism, rejecting international communism and reframing the revolution as a national project. Bolívar's sword became a powerful symbol of this identity, positioning M-19 as a continuation of Bolívar's

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[10]Former M-19 members interviewed for this project acknowledged that they chose to join the group due to its national Bolivarian ideology and urban presence.

struggle for national sovereignty (García-Durán and Grabe, 2018; Villamizar, 1995). This was not merely a rhetorical shift but also a strategic one, designed to appeal to Colombians who saw FARC's fusion of internationalist Marxism and peasant doctrine as detached from their historical and cultural context.

The adoption of nationalist and Bolivarian ideology was formally declared and reaffirmed in 1979 during the Fifth National Convention, where M-19 described its ideology as "nationalist, popular, and revolutionary" (M-19, 1979c, 3), rather than socialist (Former Combatant M-19, 2024a). According to O'Connor and Meer, "its use of the term 'nationalist' should not be conflated with the state-seeking nationalism of the late decolonial period or broader understandings of ethno-nationalism, but rather as a counterpoint to the international ideological underpinnings of its Left revolutionary contemporaries" (2021, 132).

The exaltation of M-19's nationalist character reflected its intent to differentiate its discourse from that of other Colombian guerrilla groups and the international influence shaping those movements. As M-19 commander Álvaro Fayad explained in an interview with Lara, the group sought to "elaborate a proposal that resembled the country, which they called nationalism, not the Soviet line, nor the line of Mao's China, nor the line of Cuba, but rather one rooted in the experiences of being a guerrilla in Colombia" (Lara, 1986, 187).

The new ideological proposal was widely disseminated through an interpretation of Simón Bolívar's memoirs and documents, framing M-19's struggle as a liberation movement against external forces, particularly United States imperialism (Expert Peace Process, 2023; Former Combatant M-19, 2024a; García-Durán and Grabe, 2018; Grabe, 2017; Villamizar, 2017). Additionally, M-19 replaced readings of Marx and Lenin with Colombian literature, such as novels by Gabriel García Márquez and José Eustasio Rivera, alongside Colombian history books (Expert M-19, 2024; García-Durán and Grabe, 2018). The recognition of a national ideology is described by Massetti (2009) and Coakley (2003; 2011) as a particularistic approach that fosters the construction of "our" nation in opposition to the "their" nation represented by government groups. In M-19's case, the invocation of the "true nation" helped the group

forge alliances with diverse sectors of the Colombian polity, including intellectuals, labour leaders, college students, and middle-class families.

The nationalist Bolivarian, anti-imperialist, and anti-oligarchic model proposed by M-19 presented an alternative to left-wing Marxist ideologisation. As former M-19 member Vera Grabe explains: "The M-19 emerged as a critique of the existing left-wing groups in the country, in particular, breaking with the international models (Maoism, Leninism) that dominated left-wing armed groups in Colombia." (Grabe, 2018, 9).

Another factor that set M-19 apart from other guerrilla movements was its focus on urban operations and recruitment. While groups such as FARC, ELN, EPL, and MAQL were predominantly based in rural areas, M-19 positioned itself as an urban guerrilla movement (Pecaut and González, 1997). M-19 commander Jaime Bateman believed that a successful revolution required a broad, popular movement, which meant staying close to the people in urban centres (Bateman-Cayón, 1992). This urban strategy reflected M-19's rejection of the traditional rural guerrilla model, epitomised by Maoist movements. Bateman famously dismissed the idea of "going to the jungles to eat monkeys" (M-19, 1982a; 1985f), underscoring the group's awareness of Colombia's increasing urbanisation and its focus on building an insurgency that could resonate with the urban population, rather than relying on the protracted rural warfare favoured by other groups.

The area of operations provided M-19 with two main differentiation factors. The first was the composition of its recruits, and the second was the legitimacy of its actions. Regarding the first factor, M-19 was composed primarily of middle-class men and women with higher education. [11] This social composition made M-19 more pluralistic than the predominantly peasant-based guerrilla groups. As a second strategic differentiation, M-19 recognised the need to build mass support in urban areas, where a large segment of the population was concentrated. Unlike FARC, which remained rural, M-19 deliberately focused on urban recruitment and mobilisation.

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[11]Two former M-19 members interviewed for this project were university students when they decided to join, in contrast to FARC interviewees, who had not completed elementary school.

Additionally, the group's leaders, such as Jaime Bateman and Carlos Pizarro, possessed colossal charisma, which helped them establish close ties with the urban middle class and gain a high level of legitimacy (Grabe, 2018; Villamizar, 2019). The backgrounds of M-19's members further set them apart from groups like FARC, as they used common colloquial language rather than dogmatic or foreign ideological rhetoric. Inside the organisation, they also promoted a "politics of affection" (Former Combatant M-19, 2024a;b), contrasting with the classical Marxist portrayal of military heroes as figures devoid of emotion.

The rupture in M-19's relationship with ANAPO marked a critical juncture, where ideological repositioning became a strategic goal. The group's adoption of Bolivarianism was a response to both internal pressures for ideological coherence and external competition with other guerrilla movements. By rejecting Marxist internationalism, M-19 sought to appeal to a broader Colombian audience, including intellectuals, urban youth, and middle-class sectors disillusioned with traditional leftist movements. The theft of Bolívar's sword was a deliberate act of propaganda, intended to build public support and differentiate M-19 as a defender of national identity. This change also reflected internal dynamics, where leaders such as Jaime Bateman and Álvaro Fayad advocated for an ideology deeply rooted in Colombia's unique socio-political context (M-19, 1978c; 1979a).

2.5.3   Second change: Transition to Armed Democracy (1979-1985)

The introduction of the Security Law by the Colombian government marked a critical juncture in M-19's history. This law, which granted the state extraordinary powers to combat insurgency, escalated the conflict and placed immense pressure on M-19 to reassess its military strategy and political objectives (García-Durán and Grabe, 2018; Villamizar, 1995). The heightened risk of annihilation forced the group to reconsider how to sustain both its military capabilities and political legitimacy in the face of intensified state repression (Villamizar, 2017). [12]

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[12]Authors such as Aguilera (2013) and Villamizar (1995) estimate that M-19 lost approximately 400 members to torture, disappearances, and assassinations under the Security Law operations.

The Seventh Conference in 1979 marked a turning point for M-19, as its leaders re-evaluated their ideological stance. This internal debate, intensified by external pressure from the state, led the group to adopt the concept of "armed democracy." Instead of framing their struggle solely as an attempt to overthrow the government through armed force, they began advocating for democratic reforms via both military and political channels (Expert Peace Process, 2023; M-19, 1979a). Leaders such as Jaime Bateman and Otty Patiño argued that real change in Colombia required deepening democracy rather than intensifying armed struggle (M-19, 1979b;c). This reorientation reflected a shift in priorities, as M-19 positioned itself not only as a revolutionary force but also as a proponent of democratic values.

This redefinition of M-19's political ideology during the Seventh Conference in 1979 was made public during the hostage-taking at the Dominican Republic Embassy in 1980. The operation attracted significant national and international media attention, which M-19 used to announce its new ideological perspective as "democracy in arms" (M-19, 1982a). Contrasting their approach with both the violent repression of the government and the rigid Marxism of groups such as FARC, they asserted that their goal was to democratise Colombia, rather than merely replacing one form of authoritarianism with another. This rhetorical and strategic differentiation allowed M-19 to claim a moral high ground, appealing to Colombians increasingly disillusioned with both state violence and the prolonged guerrilla warfare. According to Grabe, "although M-19 radicalised its discourse between 1975 and 1978, with this reorientation in 1979 and 1980, it developed a wider ideological outlook after realising that change in Colombia must be democratic in nature" (Grabe, 2018, 14).

M-19's new ideological stance also set it apart from guerrilla movements that were abstentionist and anti-democratic, such as the ELN (Expert ELN, 2024; Former Combatant M-19, 2024b). While other groups rejected electoral politics, M-19 embraced the idea of participating in Colombia's democratic system—albeit by force, if necessary.

We discovered that it was necessary to deepen democracy more than intensify socialism in Colombia. In one way or another, the left had always accepted that the

oligarchy was democratic just because they ran elections in the country, without paying attention to the background of that ceremonial democracy and without realising that it was tainted. This was the challenge for the revolutionary groups: to find a real democracy. We recognised that feature of democracy thanks to the reaction to the military offensive from civil society, from the human rights struggle, which is quintessentially democratic. Democracy became the fundamental crux of the ideological definition of M-19 (Patiño, 2000, 90).

The concept of a "big national sancocho" [13] (M-19, 1982b;c)—a movement that welcomed all Colombians, regardless of political affiliation—stood in stark contrast to the factionalism and exclusivity of other guerrilla groups. This inclusivity helped M-19 build broader coalitions and attract support from various social sectors, including intellectuals and the urban middle class. According to Jaime Bateman, "democracy was a flag that other guerrilla organisations had abandoned, considering it bourgeois" (Bateman-Cayón, 1992, 4). For example, the Marxist-Leninist ideology of FARC led to a rejection of democratic principles, whereas M-19 framed its struggle around the democratisation of Colombia (Pecaut and González, 1997). For Bateman, fighting for democracy meant addressing the deep-rooted social inequalities that stemmed from imperial dependence: "To the depths of social inequalities, which lie at the root of our dependence on imperialism." (Bateman-Cayón, 1992, 4). In essence, M-19 made democracy its ultimate goal.

By 1980, M-19 had transitioned from nationalist populism to "armed democracy," a doctrine that sought to merge guerrilla warfare with the goal of establishing a democratic state. This change represented a strategic effort to carve out a distinct position within Colombia's conflict, advocating democracy while continuing its armed struggle.

This ideological change represented a balance between legitimisation and differentiation: M-19 sought to gain political legitimacy by promoting democratic values while continuing its guerrilla actions. This strategic transition laid the groundwork for the group's eventual

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[13]Sancocho is a Colombian soup made with more than ten ingredients. M-19 used it as a metaphor to express that everyone was welcome in their movement.

peace agreement with the Colombian government, albeit achieved through armed means. Simultaneously, M-19 maintained its focus on differentiation from other guerrilla movements by emphasising urban warfare and public visibility.

The hostage-taking at the Dominican Republic Embassy in 1980 epitomised M-19's "armed democracy" strategy. This highly publicised event, in which no one was killed, allowed the group to demonstrate its strength and reaffirm its commitment to negotiating democratic reforms (Villamizar, 1995; 2017). Externally, the Colombian public's growing desire for peace and institutional change provided fertile ground for M-19's new messaging. Internally, however, this ideological change required careful management to prevent factionalism, as not all members supported the move towards democratic engagement (Patiño, 2000). Leaders such as Otty Patiño, Álvaro Fayad, Iván Marino, Arjaid Artunduaga, Jaime Bateman, Vera Grabe, and Carlos Pizarro played a crucial role in consolidating internal cohesion around the concept of armed democracy, further distinguishing M-19 from the purely militaristic or rural-focused strategies of groups like FARC or ELN.

2.5.4   Third change: Peace as Revolution (1985-1990)

The final phase of M-19's ideological evolution began after the Palace of Justice siege in 1985, which severely damaged the group's public legitimacy. This catastrophic event had a profound impact on both public perception and internal morale (Villamizar, 1995; 2017). According to Former Combatant M-19 (2024a) and Former Combatant M-19 (2024b), the siege triggered a period of internal discussion and re-evaluation of M-19's actions. The violent outcome, with over 100 fatalities, including members of the Supreme Court, subjected M-19 to unprecedented pressure (García-Durán and Grabe, 2018; Grabe, 2018). On 6 November 1985, 35 members of M-19 laid siege to the Palace of Justice. As Grabe explains: "When the government rejected dialogue, state forces carried out a counter-siege, resulting in more than a hundred fatalities, including the president of the Supreme Court, other magistrates and employees, and guerrilla combatants." (Grabe, 2018, 13)

For former combatants, the Palace of Justice siege was a disaster that led to a loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the Colombian public, leaving the group politically isolated (Former Combatant M-19, 2024a;b). The fallout from the siege triggered an existential crisis within M-19, prompting leaders such as Carlos Pizarro and Vera Grabe to reconsider the group's long-term strategy (M-19, 1985a;d)

In the aftermath of the Palace of Justice siege, M-19's leadership engaged in intense internal debates that culminated in the removal of commander Álvaro Fayad (Former Combatant M-19, 2024a; M-19, 1985c;h). [14] The realisation that continuing armed conflict would only deepen their isolation after the failed military action led to a fundamental re-evaluation of their strategy (M-19, 1985e;f). This period of reflection resulted in a strategic pivot toward peace, with the understanding that M-19 needed to regain legitimacy by aligning with the growing public demand for peace and reconciliation. Leaders such as Carlos Pizarro argued that peace itself could be revolutionary in Colombia's context, particularly if it led to meaningful political reforms.

In this context, M-19 underwent further ideological transformation, driven by the need to restore its legitimacy and differentiate itself from other guerrilla movements. As Vera Grabe explained: "We (the M-19) assumed a strategic perspective towards peace, not only because we felt that this option would enable us to reconnect with the country, but also because we recognised that this kind of approach could be revolutionary in the Colombian context." (Grabe, 2018, 20) This new political ideology was formally introduced to the public through a new slogan: "Life for the nation, peace for the armed forces, and war against the oligarchy!" (M-19, 1985b) With this declaration, M-19 identified a new primary enemy: the oligarchy, while rejecting military confrontation with the army. Thus, the call for peace became a crucial element in rebuilding its connection with the Colombian people and re-establishing itself as a legitimate political actor.

Vera Grabe explained that the idea of promoting peace was widely debated within M-19,

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[14] Álvaro Fayad replaced Jaime Bateman as M-19 commander following Bateman's death in a plane crash on 28 April 1983.

as the group no longer wanted to fuel a confrontation that primarily harmed civilians (Grabe, 2018). In her words: "There was an ethical principle gradually spreading through the group: if the armed struggle negatively affects the civilian population, it is necessary to stop it!" (Grabe, 2018, 18). Internally, members began to consider alternatives to war (Expert M-19, 2024; Former Combatant M-19, 2024b). Even before M-19's adoption of a peace agenda, the group had already rejected the traditional Colombian guerrilla doctrine of "win or die" (Expert M-19, 2024; García-Durán and Grabe, 2018; Patiño, 2000). By re-establishing ties with Colombian civil society, M-19 became the first guerrilla organisation to call for a peace agreement with the Colombian government.

The Palace of Justice siege marked the low point of M-19's public image, sparking intense internal debate about the movement's future direction (M-19, 1985e). Externally, M-19 capitalised on the Colombian government's growing willingness to negotiate with guerrilla groups. Their subsequent peace negotiations in 1990 and participation in the 1991 National Constituent Assembly secured them a role in Colombia's democratic future, solidifying their legitimacy while further distinguishing themselves from groups like FARC, which refused to disarm.

M-19 shifted to advocating peace as a revolutionary act, aligning with Colombia's growing demand for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. This marked a decisive legitimisation strategy, as M-19 sought to restore its standing by positioning itself as a pioneer of peace in a country torn apart by violence. Differentiation from other guerrilla groups, particularly FARC, which continued its armed struggle, became crucial. M-19 framed itself as the leading proponent of democratic change through peaceful means, further distinguishing its new political identity.

To strengthen the analysis of M-19's ideological evolution, counterfactual reasoning can be applied to critical moments in its history. For instance, had M-19 not embraced a nationalist Bolivarian identity, it would likely have struggled to differentiate itself from other Marxist guerrillas, such as FARC (Leongómez, 1991). This lack of differentiation would have hindered its ability to establish a distinct identity within the revolutionary landscape, making it difficult to gain traction among the urban population. Furthermore, without the shift towards armed democracy, M-19 might have missed the opportunity to build legitimacy as a democratic actor, preventing it from effectively engaging in peace negotiations. Without this legitimisation, its influence on the 1991 Constitution would have been minimal, and it may not have successfully transitioned into political life.

Additionally, specific phases of M-19's history highlight these dynamics. In the early phase (1970-1973), if M-19 had adhered strictly to Marxism and aligned with FARC's rural-focused approach and continued as a branch of ANAPO, they would likely have struggled to gain support from Colombia's urban middle class, a central constituency in their movement. Similarly, during the Bolivarian phase (1974-1979), if M-19 had not adopted a nationalist ideology, their appeal to a broader Colombian audience would have been limited. The armed democracy phase (1979-1985) presents a further counterfactual: without shifting to this pro-democratic rhetoric, M-19 may have failed to engage with the peace process and become further marginalised. Finally, in the peace phase (1985-1990), had M-19 not shifted towards peace after the Palace of Justice siege, they could have faced the same prolonged conflict as FARC, with dwindling public support and fewer opportunities for demobilisation.

Thus, the counterfactuals illustrate that without the mechanisms of differentiation and legitimisation, M-19 would likely have been unable to navigate the ideological changes that allowed it to survive as a relevant political force in Colombia. These mechanisms were not optional strategies but necessary responses to pressures that prompted ideological re-evaluation and the adoption of new ideological positions. By differentiating itself from other guerrilla groups and continuously seeking legitimacy, through nationalism, democracy, and

Phase	Ideological Positioning	Critical Junctures	Outcome	Implications
First Phase (1970-1974)	A Socialism guerrilla	Presidential Fraud against ANAPO	Creation of the group as a socialist option instead of a Marxist guerrilla	Positioned M-19 as the military branch of ANAPO and an advocate for a different regime
Second Phase (1974-1979)	Nationalist and Bolivarian	Breakup with ANAPO	Differentiated M-19 from other Marxist guerrilla groups and fron the ANAPO; built a nationalist identity based on Simon Bolívar	Positioned M-19 as uniquely tied to Colombia's history, gaining legitimacy among nationalist segments through Colombian symbols
Third Phase (1979-1985)	Armed Democracy	Security Law promoted by the government that threaten the group existence	Solidified the group's call for democratic reform to denounce the abuses of the government and differentiate from anti-democratic groups	Paved the way for future peace talks, with armed democracy as a part of their identity
Final Phase (1985-1990)	Peace as Revolution	Palace of Justice Siege (1985)	Though suffered loss of legitimacy after 1985 siege M-19 called for peace as a revolutionary action in a context of civil war	M-19 as the first successful case of guerrilla demobilisation and reintegration in Colombia

Table 2.2: M-19 Ideological Transformation

ultimately peace, M-19 adapted its ideology in ways that ensured its longevity and influence.

Throughout M-19's history, the tension and interaction between legitimisation and differentiation were evident. While the group sought to distinguish itself ideologically from other Marxist-Leninist movements through Bolivarian nationalism, this change also bolstered its legitimacy among the broader Colombian population.

Conversely, M-19's pursuit of peace risked internal cohesion, as some factions pushed for continued armed struggle. However, its leadership, particularly Jaime Bateman and Carlos Pizarro, successfully managed these tensions by framing peace as a revolutionary goal in itself, aligning both with public opinion and the group's internal need for coherence (Bateman-Cayón, 1992).

Externally, M-19's differentiation was shaped by political and social changes in Colombia, such as electoral fraud and opportunities for peace negotiations (Leongómez, 2003). By positioning itself distinctively from groups like FARC and ELN, M-19 aimed to carve out a unique niche within the Colombian conflict landscape.

2.6 Conclusion

This research demonstrates how the mechanisms of differentiation and legitimisation explain the ideological transformation of the M-19 guerrilla group between 1970 and 1990. M-19's survival and success as an independent movement stemmed from its ability to distinguish itself from groups like FARC and ELN through symbolic actions and the adoption of nationalist and democratic rhetoric. Simultaneously, its efforts to build legitimacy, via peace-oriented discourse, public support, and democratic participation, ensured its ideological transformation resonated with the Colombian population. This dual strategy of balancing differentiation and legitimisation validates the framework proposed in this study.

Critical junctures, such as the break with ANAPO in 1973, the pressures of the Security Act, and the shift towards peace after the 1985 Palace of Justice siege, highlight how M-19

continuously tested and adapted its ideology in response to pressures through legitimisation and differentiation. The political void left by the ANAPO split forced M-19 to reassess its identity, leading to the adoption of Bolivarian nationalism. Likewise, the intense public backlash and loss of legitimacy following the Palace of Justice siege drove M-19 to re-evaluate its armed struggle, culminating in a pivot towards peace. These pivotal moments illustrate that M-19's ideological changes were not static, but responsive to Colombia's evolving political, social, and military landscape. This adaptability reinforces the theory that ideological flexibility, driven by the need for differentiation from other guerrilla groups and the pursuit of legitimacy among the Colombian population, was central to M-19's evolution.

The theoretical framework of differentiation and legitimisation is not exclusive to M-19; it can be applied to other armed groups and guerrilla movements that undergo ideological transformations. Many insurgent groups face similar pressures to distinguish themselves from competitors, both within the revolutionary landscape and against state forces, while simultaneously seeking legitimacy from their supporters and broader society. For example, groups like the IRA and Nepalese Maoists experienced similar ideological transformations, where differentiation from other armed actors and the pursuit of legitimacy through peace negotiations led to substantial ideological changes. This theory provides a model for understanding how and why rebel groups modify their ideology over time, offering a framework for analysing other conflicts where insurgent groups must balance radical objectives with the need for broader public support.

This study contributes to the field of conflict studies by challenging the notion of ideology as a static element within armed groups. Instead, it presents ideology as dynamic, continuously reshaped by internal and external pressures. The differentiation and legitimisation framework proposed here enhances our understanding of how armed groups evolve, both tactically and ideologically, over time. In addition, this research addresses a gap in the literature concerning the ideological evolution of rebel groups, particularly within the context of insurgent movements. By focusing on ideological change, it provides valuable insights for

interpreting the development and outcomes of armed conflicts.

This article identifies an opportunity for future research to model ideological change among rebel groups using a multidimensional spatial framework. Such a model would move beyond traditional left–right classifications to account for multiple ideological dimensions, such as economic policy, anti-imperialism, and social transformation, as well as their interdependence. It would also accommodate time as an axis of analysis, highlighting how ideological changes are not always linear, but reflect strategic recalibrations shaped by legitimation needs and differentiation with rival groups until they find an ideal ideological point. This approach opens a path for more granular and comparative analyses of ideological evolution across rebel movements from different ideological families.

While this study lays the groundwork for understanding the ideological evolution of armed groups, there are limitations that future research can address. Firstly, the theory's transferability to other cases must be tested across different contexts. Secondly, future research could explore the relationship between ideological change and violence. Does a shift in ideology lead to more or less violence within a movement For example, while M-19's transition towards peace resulted in reduced violence, similar ideological changes might lead to different outcomes in other groups. Investigating how ideological change influences operational decisions, such as the use of violence or non-violent protest, would further deepen our understanding of the strategic evolution of rebel groups.

Additionally, the availability of primary sources presents both an opportunity and a challenge for future researchers. While the archival richness surrounding M-19 provides a strong foundation for analysis, the lack of access to comparable data for other groups may limit direct comparisons. However, as more archives become available, particularly in the post-conflict period, researchers can further test and refine the theories proposed in this study.

Finally, as Colombia continues its peacebuilding efforts following the 2016 agreement with FARC, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on reconciliation and the dynamics of ideological evolution in conflict. By examining how groups like M-19 successfully transitioned

from violence to peace, this research offers valuable lessons for addressing current and future conflicts, both in Colombia and globally.

Appendix 2.A   Interview Methodology

Sampling Method

The interviews were conducted using a snowball sampling method. This method was chosen due to the sensitive nature of the subject and the difficulty of accessing former combatants. Snowball sampling allowed for trust to be built with initial contacts, who then referred me to other relevant participants for the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns were paramount in conducting these interviews. Given the potential risks to both the interviewees and the researcher, the following ethical precautions were taken:

- Informed consent: All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses.

- Anonymity: To protect the identity of participants, their names are not disclosed in this study. Instead, each interview is assigned a different name as listed in the references (e.g., Juan 2023).

- Secure interview settings: For the in-person interviews, a secure and neutral location in Bogotá was chosen to ensure privacy and safety for both the participants and the researcher.

- Online interviews: Due to logistical constraints, some interviews were conducted online. In these cases, secure communication channels were used, and participants were allowed to choose their preferred mode of communication to ensure their comfort and security.

Interview Logistics

The interviews were conducted over a period spanning from January 2023 to October 2024. In-person interviews took place in Bogotá, Colombia, while online interviews were conducted using encrypted communication tools. The details of each interview are provided below:

- **Former Combatant FARC** – Male, In-person, January 18, 2023. In the text cited as José.

- **Former Combatant FARC** – Male, In-person, January 19, 2023. In the text cited as Juan.

- **Former Combatant FARC** – Female, In-Person, January 22, 2023. In the text cited as María.

- **Expert Peace Process** – Male, In-person, April 20, 2023. In the text cited as David.

- **Former Combatant M-19** – Male, Online, October 7, 2024. In the text cited as Martín.

- **Former Combatant M-19** – Male, Online, October 14, 2024. In the text cited as Mateo.

- **Expert EPL** – Female, Online, October 24, 2024. In the text cited as Ana.

- **Expert FARC** – Male, Online, October 24, 2024. In the text cited as Pedro.

- **Expert ELN** – Female, Online, October 25, 2024. In the text cited as Ema.

- **Expert M-19** – Female, Online, October 25, 2024.In the text cited as Marta.

Additionally, all interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and the recordings are stored securely, accessible only to the researcher. The interviews were later transcribed, and sensitive information was redacted when necessary to protect the identity and safety of the participants.

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Invitation to the study

Thank you for considering participating in this research project. Please take your time to read the following carefully, as it describes the purpose of this study, your participation, and your rights as a participant. You should participate only if you wish; choosing not to participate will not affect you in any way. Ask us if anything needs clarification or if you would like more information. For further questions, you may also contact us anytime at the email addresses provided below.

Background of the project

This interview is part of a project investigating narratives during the Colombian conflict to identify the ideological differences among armed groups and their ideological socialisation processes, especially in relation to the recruitment of children and adolescents.

In these interviews, you will not be asked to provide information about any kind of violence or any activity that might be considered illegal or part of a legal process. You will only be asked about your understanding of the conflict and its causes. Data collected through this interview will be anonymised, and you will not be individually identifiable in any reports or publications resulting from this research.

The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. It will be conducted through open-ended questions, where we will ask about various topics related to your understanding of the Colombian conflict.

There are some risks associated with participating in these interviews.

As a former combatant, the interviews and research might pose security and emotional risks. To mitigate these impacts, these interviews will be conducted online. During the interviews, you will not be asked to talk about any episode of violence or sensitive information that could be part of a legal process or contain sensitive data. The interviewer will ask you to change the subject if you start talking about these topics to mitigate potential risks.

Rest assured that your responses will be treated confidentially. If you feel your responses might put you at risk, please inform the research team or withdraw from the study.

Informed consent

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form before beginning your participation; alternatively, you may provide your consent verbally.

Withdrawal

Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty. If you wish to withdraw, simply notify the researchers (contact details below). If any data has already been collected before your withdrawal, it will be deleted or destroyed unless you inform the principal investigator that you agree to its use for the scientific purposes of the project.

Data collected

The United Kingdom's General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (known as the data protection law) recognize the value of personal data in research and establish provisions to support its effective use.

The interview data will be stored in electronic files on BOX, a password-protected cloud storage accessible only to the project researchers at the University of Essex. The Data Protection Officer oversees the handling of personal data and can be contacted for more information. Only fully anonymized data that does not allow individual identification will be shared or archived as part of the dissemination of our research results.

If you wish to exercise any of your rights or have any questions about your rights, contact the Data Protection Officer at dataprotectionofficer@essex.ac.uk.

Results

At the end of the project, we will publish the findings of our study (all published data will be anonymised). We will be happy to provide you with a summary of the main findings and copies of published articles if you are interested. Please provide your contact details to the research team. We will keep your contact details separate from your interview responses.

Concerns and complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or wish to make a complaint, please first contact the project's principal investigators:

Geraldine Bustos-Zamora. Email: g.bustoszamora@essex.ac.uk

If you still have concerns or feel your complaint has not been satisfactorily addressed, contact the research supervisors:

Prof. Han Dorussen. Email: hdorus@essex.ac.uk

Dra. Miranda Simon. Email: miranda.simon@essex.ac.uk

If you are still not satisfied, contact the University Research Governance Team: Email: reo-governance@essex.ac.uk.

If you are dissatisfied with how the University of Essex has processed your personal data or have any questions or concerns about your data, contact dataprotectionoffice@essex.ac.uk. If we cannot resolve the issue to your satisfaction, you have the right to file a complaint with the

Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). You can contact them at https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint/.

Funding

Ethical approval

This project has been reviewed and approved on behalf of Subcommittee 3 of the University of Essex: ETH2223-0355.

Questionnaire

- How would you describe the ideology of the organisation when you joined the organisation?

- Do you think the organisation's ideology evolved or changed during the conflict?

- How would you characterise the ideological relationship between the armed groups?

- How did the organisation's ideology influence how it framed the causes of the conflict?

- Did the organisation's objectives change in any way during the conflict?

- What role did ideology play in motivating the organisation's members and sustaining it during the conflict?

Chapter 3

Micro-ideologies to Study Rebel Groups

Abstract

This paper presents the concept of micro-ideologies to address the ideological diversity within rebel groups, moving beyond broad classifications. By integrating a qualitative case study, interviews, archival research, and a machine learning analysis, the study uncovers the subtle yet significant variations in how rebel groups frame conflicts, define goals, and establish normative constraints resulting in micro-ideologies. The qualitative case study focuses on Colombian rebel groups, revealing distinct micro-ideological positions over time despite their shared Marxist roots. The quantitative analysis employs supervised and unsupervised machine learning cluster analysis on 6,056 documents from 59 Latin American rebel organisations. The results demonstrate that micro-ideologies challenge assumptions of ideological homogeneity, showing that the ways groups define their enemies and articulate their own identities are central to shaping distinct micro-ideological trajectories. This mixed-methods approach reveals the dynamic nature of rebel ideology and provides a scalable framework for tracing micro-ideological differentiation across conflicts, offering a theoretical and methodological contribution to the study of ideology in civil wars.

3.1 Introduction

Understanding the ideological diversity within rebel groups is necessary for analysing their behaviour, strategies, and impact on conflict dynamics (Engeland and Rudolph, 2016; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014). Traditionally, studies of ideology in civil wars have treated rebel groups as ideologically monolithic entities under broad categories such as Marxism, Nationalism, or Islamism (Freeden, 2013; Hafez et al., 2022; Schubiger and Zelina, 2017). While these broad classifications have been useful for understanding overarching trends, they obscure the nuanced internal variations that shape the ideology of these groups. I introduce the concept of "micro-ideologies" to address this gap by exploring the subtle but significant differences in how rebel groups frame their conflict, define their goals, and establish normative constraints.

How can we observe distinct ideological components within the same ideological family in groups that share a common background? In this paper, I argue that rebel groups are not ideologically homogenous. Instead, their ideologies are structured around three dimensions: conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints. These dimensions determine how groups interpret the causes and nature of the conflict (framing), what they aim to achieve through violence or negotiation (goals), and the boundaries they impose on their actions (normative constraints). The variation across these dimensions reveals how groups construct unique micro-ideological identities even when operating under the same overarching doctrine.

In this paper, I adopt a mixed-methods approach, integrating a qualitative case study of Colombian rebel groups[1], ten interviews[2] with former guerrilla members and experts, archival research, and a machine-learning analysis of a compiled dataset of 6,056 documents from 59

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[1] The selection of FARC, ELN, and EPL as the focus of this study is justified by their historical influence within the broader spectrum of Colombian guerrilla movements. These groups represent the foundational "first generation" of insurgencies in Colombia, emerging in the mid-20th century and aligned with Marxist and leftist ideologies (Villamizar, 2017). Their long-standing presence, operational scale, and political agendas have profoundly shaped the dynamics of the Colombian armed conflict (Pecaut and González, 1997). In contrast, later guerrilla groups, such as M-19, Quintín Lame, and others, were more regionally focused and pursued objectives that were more limited in scope or duration (Kreiman, 2024).

[2] This project has been reviewed and approved on behalf of Subcommittee 3 of the University of Essex: ETH2223-0355.

Latin American rebel organisations.[3] These documents include public speeches, manifestos, and official public communications. I argue that they reflect how rebel groups seek to frame their ideologies to broader audiences.

In this mixed-method design, the interviews and archival research of primary documents of the organisations offer grounded context and rich data that help define and refine the micro-ideological dimensions. The qualitative case study traces how these dimensions vary over time within specific groups. The machine-learning analysis was applied in two stages: supervised classification validated the relevance of the micro-ideological dimensions across the wider dataset, identifying broader trends and patterns; unsupervised clustering revealed distinct configurations of ideological space within the same ideological family, demonstrating the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of rebel ideologies. This computational analysis complements and scales up the qualitative findings, confirming that micro-ideologies are not only conceptually robust but also empirically traceable across time and context.

The findings show the dynamism and heterogeneity of micro-ideologies, challenging static and overly broad ideological classifications. The micro-ideological framework of conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints is used to analyse how rebel groups with shared ideological roots diverge in practice. The qualitative analysis of Colombian rebel groups demonstrates that these dimensions manifest differently across similar organisations and change over time. Despite their shared Marxist roots, groups such as the Armed Revolutionary Forces (FARC), the Popular Liberation Army (EPL) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) developed distinct micro-ideological positions. FARC shows a more flexible military and political engagement, ELN remained ideologically rigid, and EPL transitioned from Maoist to promotion of peace. These variations illustrate how the micro-ideological framework captures micro-ideological differentiation within a single ideological family.

The machine-learning analysis extends the findings to a broader scale, demonstrating that micro-ideologies are measurable and vary meaningfully across groups. The cluster analysis

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[3]The documents were obtained using web-scraping in R from the repository of Centro de Documentación para los Movimientos Armados (CeDeMA).

reveals that how rebel organisations frame the conflict, define themselves, identify their ene-
mies, and articulate who they claim to represent is the primary factor distinguishing micro-
ideological positions. In contrast, dimensions such as conflict goals and normative constraints
appear more context-dependent. These findings reinforce the utility of micro-ideologies as
an analytical category by showing that they are empirically observable, enabling systematic
comparison across time, organisations, and ideological families.

I present micro-ideologies as a lens to understand the ideologies of rebel groups in multi-
actor civil wars. Building on prior scholarship emphasising ideological diversity (Belgioioso
and Thurber, 2023; Berti, 2023; Hafez, 2020; Hafez et al., 2022; Schubiger and Zelina, 2017),
this study extends this analysis by offering a framework for analysing ideological variation,
which can be expanded to other ideological families. For scholars, this study advances the
understanding of ideological diversity in conflict dynamics, challenging the assumption of
homogeneity within ideological families. For policymakers, it provides actionable an tool
for designing targeted peacebuilding initiatives, context-specific negotiations, and adaptive
counterinsurgency strategies based on micro-ideological positions for different rebel organi-
sations.

3.2   Literature Review

Ideology plays a dual role in shaping both the internal cohesion and external positioning of
rebel groups. Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2014) conceptualises ideology as a structured set of
ideas that helps define grievances, articulate objectives, and guide action. This understanding
has encouraged scholars to explore ideology not merely as rhetoric, but as a practical tool
for organising behaviour. Kaplan et al. (2018) and Pischedda (2020) further emphasise that
ideology operates along internal and external dimensions: it helps resolve collective action
problems within groups and serves as a signalling device to attract allies and supporters. In
multi-actor conflicts, where multiple groups can share broad ideological labels, ideology also

functions as a marker of distinction. Armed groups often compete for recognition and support within the same ideological family, using ideological discourse to differentiate themselves from rivals and assert legitimacy (Belgioioso and Thurber, 2023; Berti, 2019; Hafez, 2020; Hafez et al., 2022; Schwab, 2023).

Ideology provides a framework to understand claims and strategic decisions made by rebel groups (Ahmadov and Hughes, 2017). Scholars have long argued that ideology can be critical in explaining political grievances, claims, and the programmes of armed groups, also allows rebel groups to rationalise their existence, organise their actions, and attract support (Curtis and Sindre, 2019; Engeland and Rudolph, 2016; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014; Sartori, 1969). In this context, ideology not only serves as a guiding principle but as a strategic tool, offering non-material incentives to foster loyalty and internal unity (Ahmadov and Hughes, 2017; Hughes and Sasse, 2016; Ugarriza and Craig, 2013).

Emerging research has increasingly focused on the role of ideology in shaping the dynamics of civil wars. Ideology is fundamental to understanding not only conflict outcomes but also its duration, intensity, and the micro-processes that occur within civil wars (Hafez et al., 2022). Ideology has been used to legitimise violence (Gade et al., 2019; Hafez, 2020; Hafez et al., 2022; Leader-Maynard, 2013; 2014; 2022), shape relationships between rebel groups and civilians (Arjona, 2014; Arjona et al., 2015; Arjona and Kalyvas, 2012; Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020; Jentzsch et al., 2015; Weinstein, 2006; Wood and Thomas, 2017), affects target selection (Polo and Gleditsch, 2016; Thaler, 2012; Wood and Thomas, 2017), and influences post-war political preferences (Curtis and Sindre, 2019; Jentzsch et al., 2015; Nilsson et al., 2020; Schubiger and Zelina, 2017; Sindre, 2018). These studies underscore ideology's role in sustaining wartime collective action (Basedau et al., 2016; Costalli and Ruggeri, 2017; Green, 2016; Guichaoua, 2012; Gutierrez-Sanin, 2012; Moro, 2017; Ortega, 2012; Shesterinina, 2016; Tilly and Tilly, 1981) and providing a moral framework that guides behaviour under extreme conditions (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2017; Green, 2016; Shesterinina, 2016). However, the predominant focus on analysing ideology based on broad ideological

families, such as Communism, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism, thus overlooking the intra-ideological variation within these categories, as well as its role in micro-level analysis.

Ideological proximity in multi-actor civil wars creates a unique dynamic where groups with similar ideological foundations often become significant threats to each other. The "proximity-distance paradox" (Hafez, 2020; Hafez et al., 2022) posits that rebel groups from the same ideological family frequently enter into competitive or hostile relationships as they vie for dominance within their shared ideological space (Hafez, 2020; Hafez et al., 2022). This competition arises not despite their ideological similarities, but because of them, as groups seek to establish themselves as the most legitimate or powerful representative of their cause. Phillips (2015) expands on this by arguing that ideological extremism exacerbates these rivalries, leading to inter-rebel fratricide, which can paradoxically contribute to the longevity of rebel groups by intensifying their commitment to survival and ideological purity. In such contexts, ideology operates both as a banner under which groups organise, and as a strategic tool for gaining legitimacy and support (Hafez, 2020; Phillips, 2015).

Schubiger and Zelina (2017) argue that the full extent of ideological variation is still underexplored, as much of the current analysis focuses on differences between ideological families rather than on internal variations and their impact on outcomes. While this approach highlights the competitive dynamics within ideological families, it lacks a framework for understanding why certain rebel groups choose cooperation over conflict despite their ideological similarities (Balcells and Steele, 2016; Benford and Snow, 2000). It also does not address the specific micro-level variations that can explain these divergent behaviours within the same ideological family.

Another important issue in the study of rebel group ideology is the gap between leadership and combatants in ideological commitment, often studied through a principal-agent model (Basedau et al., 2022; 2016; Gates, 2002; Green, 2016; Weinstein, 2006). Ideological enforcement becomes a challenge as leaders attempt to ensure that rank-and-file members adhere to the group's broader ideological goals, a task complicated by physical distance, in-

formation asymmetry, and varying levels of ideological commitment (Basedau et al., 2016; Green, 2016).

The reliance on broad ideological classifications limits the ability to explore how specific ideological configurations vary within these overarching categories, because such broad focus can obscure the finer ideological distinctions that are essential for understanding the strategic behaviour of rebel groups (Freeden, 2003; 2013; Gerring, 1997; Hafez, 2020; Leader-Maynard, 2013). This gap calls for a more granular analysis of ideological variation within these big ideological families.

Despite the recognition of the role of ideology in civil wars, much of the literature has focused on macro-level ideological categories. While these big ideological classifications capture general trends, especially in large-N studies, they fail to account for the variations within groups sharing an ideological family. In this paper I address this gap by introducing the concept of micro-ideologies to explain intra-ideological variation among rebel groups in multi-actor civil wars. Unlike the macro ideological categories, micro-ideologies focus on internal ideological distinctions within groups. Specifically, I argue that rebel groups differentiate themselves through their combination of conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints.

3.3 Micro-ideologies: A framework to study ideology

In this article I propose a framework for understanding the variation in rebel groups' ideologies within the same family. I argue that ideology can be analysed based on a micro-ideology consisting of three dimensions: conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints. This typology builds upon the model presented by Hafez (2020); Hafez et al. (2022) and provides a more nuanced way to analyse and classify organisations that are often grouped under broad ideological labels, such as Marxist, Leftist, Nationalist or Ethnonationalist movements.

Hafez et al. (2022) presents a model of ideology in civil wars that focuses on three dimensions: conflict framing, ideal polity, and territorial aspirations. Conflict framing refers to how groups construct antagonistic identities by defining in-groups and out-groups. The ideal polity captures the group's vision for a future political order, while territorial aspirations reflect positions on secession, autonomy, or state control, issues often tied to ideology but not always explicitly framed as such (Hafez, 2020; Hafez et al., 2022). These dimensions offer a valuable foundation for examining how rebel groups articulate their ideological positions.

However, to better account for the diversity and adaptability of ideology observed in rebel organisations, I propose broadening this framework to include conflict goals and normative constraints. Conflict goals serve as a more inclusive category that encompasses long-term visions, such as ideal polity, and spatial claims, such as territorial aspirations, while also capturing a wider range of ideologically grounded aims, including regime reform, negotiated settlements, or symbolic resistance. This broader lens reflects how groups define what they are fighting for in an evolving political contexts, rather than only in relation to fixed end-states.

Normative constraints, in turn, refer to the ethical boundaries and strategic limits that rebel groups impose on their own conduct (Christensen, 2020; Green, 2016). These include justifications for violence, rules of engagement, and the treatment of civilians or political opponents. While often implicit, such constraints are shaped by ideological commitments and play an important role in maintaining internal cohesion and legitimacy. This dimension draws on understandings of ideology as not just goal-oriented but also action-guiding, structuring both the means and ends of political struggle (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014; Kaplan et al., 2018; Pischedda, 2020). By attending to how groups justify or reject specific practices, we can better understand differences in how similar groups operate, even within the same ideological tradition.

Together, these additional dimensions, conflict goals and normative constraints, make it possible to identify and compare ideological variation more precisely, addressing the limita-

tions of existing models that treat ideology as static or uniform within ideological families.

This framework contributes to ongoing debates within political theory concerning the fluidity and adaptability of ideology (Freeden, 2003; 2013). Ideological theory often focuses on stable belief systems, especially as seen in party ideologies during peacetime (Ishiyama, 2019; Sindre and Söderström, 2016; Söderström, 2016). Political ideologies in these settings tend to emphasise coherence and consistency to build lasting loyalty, policy continuity, and an institutionalised identity (Berti, 2019; 2023). However, in violent conflict contexts, ideological flexibility becomes more central. Rebel ideologies must serve dual functions: maintaining internal cohesion while responding dynamically to rapidly changing conflict environments (Schwab, 2023; Staniland, 2012). In such cases, ideological rigidity can be detrimental, because it reduces the group's ability to adapt to new opportunities, differentiate and keep relevant in a political scenario.

The micro-ideological model highlights this dynamic nature by providing a structured yet adaptable framework for mapping ideologies. The model's three dimensions: conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints illustrates how ideological elements can be recalibrated to sustain a group's relevance and operational effectiveness.

In civil war studies, research on resource constraints, external support, and strategic motivations underscores how these factors shape the ideological expressions of rebel groups (Ahmed, 2018; Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012; Huang, 2020; Murshed, 2002; Revkin, 2020). Unlike state actors or political parties, rebel groups operate in resource-scarce environments where access to material support is often unpredictable (Akcinaroglu and Tokdemir, 2018; Canetti et al., 2010; Florea, 2020). Resources, whether financial, material, or logistical, play a crucial role in determining a group's operational capacity and influence its ideological stance (Basedau et al., 2022; Florez-Morris, 2007; Huang, 2016). For instance, groups that rely heavily on foreign funding or support from ideological allies may align their goals and framing to meet the expectations of their sponsors, which can cause ideological drift or lead to increased flexibility (Brathwaite, 2013; Huang and Sullivan, 2021; Joshi, 2023). The pursuit

of resource security often forces groups to adopt more pragmatic or instrumental ideological stances, emphasising survival over ideological purity.

Additionally, strategic motivations in civil wars, such as establishing control over territory, securing legitimacy, or negotiating with state actors, directly impact a rebel group's ideological priorities (Bosi and Porta, 2012; Druckman et al., 2023; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014; Staniland, 2017). Groups might strategically emphasise normative constraints on violence if they seek international legitimacy or local civilian support Sarvananthan (2018); Terpstra and Frerks (2017). Conversely, those aiming for total regime change may relax normative boundaries in favour of more aggressive tactics, if such an approach aligns with their immediate conflict goals (Aguilera, 2013; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Franco, 2017). This interaction between strategic motivations and resource availability complicates the ideological landscape, demonstrating that rebel ideologies are not static belief systems under a big umbrella label, but adaptive tools that reflect priorities and constraints.

By situating the micro-ideologies within these broader theoretical debates, this framework emphasises the adaptability and strategic utility of ideology for rebel groups in conflict. Rather than viewing ideology as a monolithic set of beliefs, this model enables us to see ideology as an operational asset that groups adjust to navigate the practical challenges of warfare.

Conflict Framing

One of the central elements of a rebel group's ideology is how it frames the conflict. Conflict framing involves how a rebel group presents its struggle, identity, and the enemy. By creating a "them versus us" dichotomy, it helps groups justify their actions and frame the rebel fight as the best path to change (Benford and Snow, 2000). This framing serves as a diagnostic tool for understanding the group's motivations and justifying their violent actions.

Conflict framing is an integral part of the founding narrative of rebel groups and influences their behaviour. Public declarations at the start of a conflict, as Green (2016) notes,

Micro-ideology Component	Function in Rebel Ideology
Conflict Framing	• Definition of the nature and causes of the conflict • Self-identification of the group and its role in the conflict • Definition of the enemy • Definition of the part of the population that the group represents
Conflict Goal	• The political and social outcome the group aims to achieve such as regime change, autonomy, revolution, negotiated peace • The broader vision of the future that legitimises the group's actions
Normative Constraints	• The group's stated rules and principles regarding acceptable conduct in war • Ethical limits on violence, targeting, and negotiation

Table 3.1: Micro-ideologies in rebel groups: Dimensions and Functions

typically mark the emergence of a rebel organisation and its conflict framing. Additionally, in environments of rebel competition, the origin of the movement significantly impacts how it selects targets and engages with other groups and civilians (Shesterinina, 2016; Shesterinina and Livesey, 2024). Framing the conflict early on is crucial for justifying the group's existence and behaviour throughout the conflict, making it a foundational decision that shapes future interactions.

Conflict framing is essential in war, but it is not static, as it contributes to the reconfiguration of political strategies. According to Berti (2022), conflict framing helps generate a combatant identity and allows rebel groups to adjust their stance as circumstances evolve. For example, groups may shift from revolutionary to resistance narratives, as Hezbollah did (Berti, 2019), to facilitate political participation. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Sinn Féin similarly reframed their conflict to align with changing political objectives (English, 2019). Conflict framing is dynamic and can shift over time based on the rebel group's diagnosis of the conflict, enabling them to navigate war phases effectively.

To measure conflict framing, public statements, recruitment materials, social media communications, and propaganda materials are useful for examining how a group constructs its us versus them narrative. Conflict framing can also be observed through slogans or symbols that reinforce group identity and antagonism toward the enemy. Conflict framing can be coded along a spectrum based on the intensity of group identity formation and enemy description, from moderate pragmatic or inclusive language to extreme radical, exclusionary, or existentially antagonistic language.

Conflict framing evolves as rebel organisations seek to align their narratives with changing political and social landscapes. For example, the IRA initially framed its struggle as a nationalist liberation movement against British colonial rule. Over time, as political opportunities for peace emerged, the IRA reframed its conflict to emphasize political participation and negotiations, leading to the Good Friday Agreement (English, 2019).

Conflict framing is central to how rebel groups define their struggle, construct their identity, and identify their enemies. This dimension significantly contributes to micro-ideological variation by shaping each group's strategic narrative. For instance, the IRA framed its conflict as a nationalist struggle for independence, contrasting with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who emphasized ethnic self-determination (Phillips, 2015). These distinct framings influenced their recruitment strategies, operational choices, and alliances, underscoring how framing nuances lead to diverse micro-ideologies within shared ideological families.

Conflict Goals

Conflict goals are what a group aims to achieve at the end of the conflict, such as overthrowing the government, establishing a new political system, or achieving political inclusion (Ron, 2001). Additionally, these goals include the means of warfare and, in some cases, aspirations for territorial control. Understanding conflict goals helps clarify the group's ultimate objectives and the strategies they employ to reach them.

I argue that territorial control is often part of a rebel group's conflict goal. Rebel governance, which reflects the group's ability to control and administer territory, serves as a test of the group's coherence and ideological commitment (Arjona, 2014; Florea, 2020). This idea complements Hafez (2020) and Hafez et al. (2022)'s discussion of territorial aspirations as an ideological dimension, though it is important to recognise that some groups do not seek territorial control (Thaler, 2012). The pursuit of territorial control, or lack thereof, reveals much about a group's strategic and ideological priorities, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their conflict goals.

Conflict goals often evolve over time and vary significantly, even among groups within the same ideological family. While Marxist groups are often assumed to share the goal of establishing a communist regime, examples such as the Movement 19th of April (M-19) in Colombia and The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Mexico show that their goals can differ significantly (Estrada and Bataillon, 2012; Villamizar, 1995; 2017). As Belgioioso and Thurber (2023) point out, conflict goals capture the ideal justifications and ultimate ambitions of rebel groups, which can range from political participation to regime change. By analysing conflict goals, we can better understand the ideological diversity within rebel groups and how their objectives shift over time.

To measure conflict goals, strategic documents, leadership statements, manifestos, and battlefield behaviours offer insight into a group's ultimate objectives and intermediate goals. Conflict goals can be further inferred from the types of targets a group prioritises or the territorial control they establish. Conflict goals can be scored based on their long-term or short-term orientation, as well as their specificity. A high score might indicate detailed long-term ambitions, for example regime change or establishing a state, while a low score could indicate more tactical, flexible goals focused on immediate survival or local power.

Conflict goals, such as regime change, political participation, or revolutionary transformation, further drive micro-ideological divergence. EZLN pursued local autonomy for Indigenous communities in Mexico, while the Shining Path in Peru sought a radical communist state

(Balcells and Kalyvas, 2014; Balcells and Steele, 2016). These differing aspirations shaped their operational strategies and interaction with both local populations and international actors. Such variations highlight how divergent goals lead to unique micro-ideologies, even among groups sharing foundational ideologies like Marxism.

Conflict goals often change as rebel groups adapt to new opportunities or constraints. For instance, the EZLN in Mexico initially aimed for a national revolution but later shifted its focus to indigenous autonomy and local governance (Estrada and Bataillon, 2012). This shift was driven by the realisation that grass-roots support and community alliances were more achievable than a nationwide uprising (Balcells and Kalyvas, 2014; Balcells and Steele, 2016).

The Shining Path in Peru provides another example. Initially committed to establishing a Maoist communist state, the group's goals shifted after significant losses in leadership and territory (Ron, 2001). To survive, the Shining Path de-emphasised its state-building agenda and focused on tactical survival and local influence, illustrating how strategic setbacks can redefine a group's aspirations.

Normative Constraints

Ideology also imposes normative constraints on rebel groups, affecting their use of violence. In multi-actor civil wars, rebel groups compete not only through violence but also through ideological means (Leader-Maynard, 2022; Strang, 2015; Tokdemir et al., 2021). These groups use ideology to define norms for cohesion and to establish boundaries regarding the acceptable use of violence. Green (2016) argues that solid ideological institutions within a group can limit violence, as shown in the cases of the LTTE and the Farabumbo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), where ideology restrained sexual violence (Revkin and Wood, 2021; Wood, 2010). Normative constraints are crucial to understanding the behaviour of rebel groups, especially in terms of how and when they use violence and when they restrain its use.

Ideological education plays a central role in enforcing normative constraints within rebel

groups. Ideological education helps resolve the commanders' dilemma by ensuring that fight-
ers are ideologically committed and restrained in their use of violence (Green, 2016). For
example, groups like Hezbollah modified their use of violence to align with ideological goals
(Berti, 2022). Ideological education provides a framework for maintaining discipline and co-
hesion within rebel groups, ensuring that violence is used strategically and in line with the
group's broader ideological goals.

Normative constraints are shaped by a combination of previous experiences and external
incentives. Rebel groups' normative constraints evolve based on their experiences, conflict
framing, and conflict goals. Some groups also adopt international norms, such as the jus in
bello (laws of war), as part of their ideological commitments (Christensen, 2020). Constraints
may also be influenced by incentives such as gaining international legitimacy (Stewart, 2020;
Terpstra, 2020). By analysing normative constraints, we can better understand how rebel
groups balance violence and legitimacy and how they navigate the complexities of civil war
environments.

Normative constraints provide an analytical tool for measuring rebel groups' use of vio-
lence and their ideological consistency. Normative constraints dictate which forms of violence
are permissible, who can be targeted, and whether sanctions are applied for violations. These
constraints vary within ideological families and over time, offering clues into the behaviour
of different rebel groups (Brosché and Sundberg, 2023). Understanding the role of normative
constraints allows for a more detailed analysis of the patterns of violence used by rebel groups
and their ideological coherence across different conflicts.

Patterns of violence, treatment of civilians, internal codes of conduct, and judicial or
disciplinary practices within the group can reveal normative constraints. Public commitments
to international norms, like humanitarian rules or restrictions on certain types of violence,
also reflect this dimension. Normative constraints can be assessed by the consistency and
strictness with which groups adhere to stated norms, as well as the presence of accountability
mechanisms, for example trials for members who violate norms. A high level of commitment

indicates rigorous adherence, while low commitment suggests leniency or lack of formalised norms.

Normative constraints, encompassing rules on the use of violence and interactions with civilians, add another layer of variation. For example, Hezbollah's emphasis on minimising civilian casualties to maintain political legitimacy stands in contrast to Al-Shabaab's use of indiscriminate violence, which alienates local populations (Hafez, 2020). These differing norms reflect how ideological commitments shape behaviour and strategy, contributing to distinct micro-ideologies within ideological families.

Micro-Ideologies Interaction

Micro-ideologies emerge not only from the presence of conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints, but from the interaction between them. These dimensions shape and reinforce each other in ways that influence group ideological coherence. For example, how a group frames the conflict often determines what goals it sees as achievable and legitimate. A revolutionary frame can promote maximalist goals such as regime overthrow, while a resistance frame can be tied to reformist and negotiated outcomes. In turn, these goals influence the normative constraints a group adopts, groups aiming for broad social legitimacy can restrict violence more strictly than those pursuing existential and totalising outcomes.

These interactions are visible in empirical cases. FARC's reframing of the conflict toward peace and social justice was not only a conflict framing transformation but also reoriented its goals toward political negotiation and adjusted its normative stance to embrace electoral and diplomatic strategies (Pecaut and González, 1997; Villa, 2006; Villamizar, 2017). Similarly, Hezbollah's evolving conflict frame, from resistance to state-building, coincided with a transformation in goals and the tightening of normative constraints to align with its political ambitions (Berti, 2022).

Understanding micro-ideologies as the product of interdependent dimensions allows for a more dynamic reading of rebel ideology,capturing both variation and internal coherence. This

model provides a way to disaggregate broader ideologies, allowing us to analyse the specific ideological components that shape each rebel group's identity. By breaking down these components, we can compare not only different groups within the same ideological family but also across larger ideological categories. This approach offers a deeper understanding of the unique ideological makeup of each group, highlighting the internal variation within ideological families as well as across broader movements.

Micro-ideologies are not static; they evolve in response to internal dynamics and external pressures. By examining the evolution of conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints within a single organisation, we can understand how ideological shifts occur and their implications for behaviour and strategy.

One of the most common ways to classify rebel actors based on ideology is through the category of left-Marxist groups. Balcells and Kalyvas (2022) suggest that revolutionary socialist rebels form a broadly identifiable rebel type, similar to how communist parties can be analysed as a single type despite some ideological variation. Marxist groups represent different goals, objectives, and normative institutions, leading to significant variation among them (Tucker, 1967). This category acts as an umbrella term, covering the general ideological family but not necessarily reflecting the specific ideologies proclaimed by individual groups.

Marxist rebel groups are known for their emphasis on ideological training as a core component of their operations (Aguilera, 2013; Green, 2016; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014). According to Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2014), communist groups are more likely to emphasise ideological training because political consciousness is necessary for gaining combatant loyalty and civilian support. These groups often have state-building aspirations, necessitating a structured ideological program. Marxist groups also exhibit a strong programmatic orientation that prescribes both internal and external institutions (Arjona et al., 2015; Balcells and Kalyvas, 2014; Mampilly and Stewart, 2021; Schubiger and Zelina, 2017). These characteristics distinguish Marxist groups from other rebel organisations, emphasising their approach to political consciousness and state-building.

In addition to their programmatic orientation, Marxist groups have created institutions dedicated to disseminating their ideology through recruitment and indoctrination processes [4]. Marxist rebel groups often use socialisation and indoctrination to spread their ideology (Green, 2016; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Giustozzi, 2010; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014). For instance, in the ELN, as observed by Aguilera (2006); Villamizar (2017), there was a strict commitment to revolution, with ideology prioritised over personal matters such as family or private love. Groups like FARC, ELN, EPL, and others in Colombia, as well as the Shining Path and FMLN, established political schools for ideological dissemination. However, as Schubiger and Zelina (2017) point out, there is significant variation in how these groups approach indoctrination, even though they belong to the same ideological family.

The characteristics of Marxist groups provide an opportunity to apply the model of micro-ideologies. This model allows us to understand better the variation between different rebel groups' conflict framing, goals, and normative constraints highlighting the internal differences and offering a more precise understanding of how ideologies influence rebel groups.

3.4   Methods and Data

I employ a mixed-methods approach to explore the micro-ideologies within rebel groups, integrating qualitative case study, interviews, and archival research with quantitative data analysis. By combining in-depth examination of the Colombian Civil War with supervised machine learning and cluster analysis applied to a dataset of rebel communications, this approach offers both granular findings and broader micro-ideological patterns across Latin American rebel groups.

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[4]According to the participants in the interviews, they were part of the Ideological School in FARC. Also, EPL had an Ideological School. However, this process might differ based on the role and hierarchy of the organisation; further research will need to analyse the ideological school participation of rank-and-file soldiers, mid-level commanders and high-rank commanders

Qualitative Methods and Data

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach (Beach, 2017; Beach and Pedersen, 2013) to explore the ideological variation within Marxist rebel groups in the Colombian Civil War. The case study method allows for an in-depth analysis of how distinct micro-ideologies emerge within rebel groups that share a broad ideological family. The Colombian civil war, with its multiple Marxist rebel groups, provides an ideal context for examining micro-ideologies within the same ideological family in a multi-actor civil war.

The Colombian Civil War was selected as the primary case due to its characteristics. First, the conflict involves more than two rebel groups with similar ideological roots (Marxism), making it a rich context for studying ideological variation within a shared ideological family. Second, the long duration of the conflict (active since 1964) allows for the analysis of ideological change or continuity over time. Third, the interactions between FARC, ELN, and EPL, as part of the first generation of guerrillas in the country, provide opportunities to observe how these groups positioned themselves ideologically relative to each other.

The data were collected from a combination of primary and secondary sources to ensure the coverage of each group's ideological evolution. The manifestos from the Conferences of FARC, ELN, and EPL were analysed to extract the micro-ideological foundations of each group. These documents provide data into how each group framed their conflict, defined their goals, and articulated their normative constraints at their inception and how that changed over time. Also, I conducted ten semi-structured interviews with experts in the Colombian guerrillas and former combatants. These interviews were essential for understanding how ideology was internalised and enforced within the ranks, as well as for identifying shifts and critical junctures in ideological commitments. In the text, the interviews are cited using different names to guarantee the confidentiality of the participants [5] .

I also collected and reviewed historical accounts, biographies, and scholarly analyses of the Colombian Civil War to provide context and cross-reference the claims made in the primary

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[5]More details of the interviews can be found in the Appendix

data. Additionally, a selection of public reports and speeches was reviewed to corroborate the findings from the manifestos and interviews.

The analysis focused on identifying how each group's ideology manifested in terms of the three dimensions of the analytical framework: conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints. The data were coded and analysed thematically to categorise elements of each group's ideology, using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches.

Subsequently, I conducted a comparative analysis across FARC, ELN, and EPL to identify ideological similarities and differences. This cross-group comparison helped highlight the unique micro-ideologies of each group and how they diverged despite sharing a common Marxist foundation.

To enhance the reliability of the findings, data triangulation was employed by cross-referencing the manifestos with interview data and secondary sources. This approach ensured that the conclusions drawn about each group's ideology were robust and supported by multiple sources of evidence. Additionally, to ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, several strategies were implemented; using both primary and secondary sources enabled a more comprehensive understanding of each group's ideology and reduced the risk of bias associated with reliance on a single data source. Reflexivity was practised throughout the interview process to account for potential biases, ensuring that the questions asked did not lead interviewees toward particular ideological interpretations. All interviews were transcribed and cross-checked for consistency.

Quantitative Data Collection and Machine Learning

To test the results from the qualitative approach and validate the category of micro-ideology, I also created a dataset that comprises 6,056 speeches from 59 rebel organisations from 1959 to 2023 across 13 Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America. These communications were acquired from the *Centro de Documentación de los Movements Armados (CeDeMA)* using web scraping techniques in R. The criteria of exclusion were organisations that had been

active for fewer than five continuous years. Due to data availability, the number of documents varies among rebel groups. Additionally, considering the number of organisations and their active years, there is an over-representation of Colombian organisations, particularly FARC and ELN [6].

After the collection of the documents, I pre-processed the text using standard natural language processing techniques such as tokenisation, and stop-word removal. I then applied two machine-learning approaches to analyse ideological variation.

First, I used supervised classification to test whether the dimensions of micro-ideology, conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints, could be systematically identified in the text. I manually coded 3 percent of the documents to train the classifier using different ideological categories that capture the self-definition of the group, who they represent, who their enemy is, what their main goal is and what they are permitted to do. I employed supervised machine learning with the Naive Bayes classifier to categorise the remaining documents [7]. I used Naive Bayes classifier because it is commonly used for document classification into two or more categories. The classifier was trained using class labels assigned to documents, and subsequently, it predicted the most likely classes for new, unlabelled documents (Grimmer et al., 2022).

The documents were coded for themes related to conflict framing, including self-identification labels such as "Marxist", "revolutionary", and "resistance movement"; representation claims such as "peasants", "workers", and "the people"; and enemy construction terms such as "capitalism", "imperialism", and "the regime". Conflict goals were identified through references to intended political outcomes, including "liberation", "revolution", and aspirations to form or participate in a "political party". Normative constraints included explicit or implicit statements about acceptable conduct, such as "rules on the use of violence", "commitment to electoral participation", and "mass mobilisation". The coding process was based on the micro-ideological framework developed in the paper but remained open to additional, emergent

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[6] More details about the inclusion, cleaning and collection criteria can be found in the Appendix

[7] More details about the pre-processing of the documents and the codebook can be found in the Appendix

themes that expanded or refined the initial categorisation.

After executing the supervised classification model, I include in the dataset a label for each document in each micro-ideological dimension. This classification method offers two main advantages. Firstly, it facilitates the tracking of changes over time within each organisation. Secondly, it aids in identifying patterns and differences between organisations.

As a second part of the machine learning analysis, I applied K-means unsupervised clustering to explore latent patterns within the dataset. While the clusters helped identify groupings of documents that shared similar discursive patterns, their purpose was not to classify ideology per se, but to show how micro-ideological positions varied within the same ideological family. Clustering served as a complementary tool to validate the heterogeneous nature of ideology. This method grouped documents into clusters based on their content, revealing patterns and proximities within the data (Grimmer et al., 2022)

Together, these methods show that micro-ideologies are not only observable but also analytically useful for capturing structured variation in how rebel groups define themselves, pursue goals, and regulate behaviour.

For the quantitative text analysis machine learning approach, I assume that public documents reflect the ideology. Also, the exclusion of private documents for this part of the analysis is motivated by data availability, because private documents are harder to collect in a systematic manner. This assumption is based on the premise that rebel groups use public declarations to garner popular support. Additionally, in this analysis, I do not differentiate between discourse and ideology as separate categories; instead, discourses are considered integral components of each rebel group's ideology.

3.5   Testing the model: Colombian Civil War and Machine Learning Analysis

3.5.1   Micro-Ideologies in the Colombian Civil War

Marxist insurgent groups operate in similar environments, yet they exhibit differences in their micro-ideological configurations, which can be understood by examining their official documents. To demonstrate the model and test the category of micro-ideologies, I analyse documents from the conferences of FARC, ELN and EPL across the micro-ideological dimensions of conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints. I also incorporate interviews with former rebel combatants and experts to support the analysis.

The Colombian civil war is one of the most prolonged conflicts in the world, having been active since 1964, with the formation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and and continues with the still-active National Liberation Army (ELN). This conflict exhibits several distinct characteristics. First, it involves more than two rebel groups within the same ideological family, Marxism. Second, the counterinsurgency response was ideologically motivated, leading to the creation of paramilitary groups. Third, its longevity allows us to track ideological changes and continuities over time. Additionally, it provides an opportunity to analyse the interactions between different organisations within the same ideological family.

Revolutionary Army Forces of Colombia (FARC)

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)[8] emerged in 1964 as a self-defence group in Tolima, Colombia. Its origins lay in rural resistance to state repression, with its first combat against the Colombian army at Marquetalia on May 27, 1964, an event the group later marked as its official birthdate (Leongómez, 1991; 1996; Villamizar, 2017). By 1965,

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[8]In Spanish: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia

FARC formalised its ideological stance through its First Agrarian Program, which declared revolution as a historical necessity and legitimised violence as a tool for systemic change. The program framed armed struggle as the only viable path to power in a society where peaceful alternatives had been systematically denied:

> We are revolutionaries who fight and resist for regime change. However, we wanted and fought for that change in the least painful way. That way was violently closed to us, and since we are revolutionaries who will play the historical role that corresponds to us in one way or another, we had to look for the other way: the armed revolutionary way to fight for power. (FARC, 1965).

From the outset, FARC defined its goals within a Marxist framework, emphasising the establishment of a proletariat-led state. Yet, the group also articulated normative constraints on violence, framing its actions as morally justified resistance aimed at protecting rural communities and targeting the "oligarchic regime and Yankee imperialism" (FARC, 1965), while asserting that its discipline would differ from the "brutal and discriminatory methods" (FARC, 1965) of the state's forces. This moral framing distinguished FARC from its adversaries and aimed to legitimise its struggle in the eyes of potential recruits and sympathisers.

As FARC evolved, its ideology adapted to both internal needs and external pressures. During the Second Conference in 1966, the group sharpened its "us vs. them" narrative, portraying itself as the legitimate defender of the rural poor against an unjust state. This period saw FARC transition from a self-defence group to a more explicitly revolutionary movement, emphasising mass mobilisation and political education as cornerstones of its strategy: "The Colombian guerrilla movement, as the highest expression of the mass struggle for national liberation through the development of the revolution, is a political movement expressed through revolutionary organisation and armed action"(FARC, 1966). The establishment of ideological schools in 1969(FARC, 1969), further consolidated this identity, institutionalising Marxist-Leninist principles among recruits and aligning their actions with the group's long-term revolutionary objectives

By the 1970s, FARC's ideological framework had become increasingly sophisticated. The Fourth Conference in 1971 introduced a comprehensive military plan that transitioned the group from defensive strategies to a proactive revolutionary war, reinforcing the integration of ideological education with military tactics (FARC, 1971) consolidating its conflict goal. According to Jose in an interview, "So, in the FARC, alongside all those efforts of development, obtaining resources, and waging war, there was also an apparatus for training and schools. There were already handbooks, curricula, and programmes that outlined the FARC's ideology and were reflected in the FARC statutes. The FARC regulations. The statutes define the most important political, ideological, and military principles, and the regulations are concrete rules" (Former Combatant FARC, 2023a).

In its early years, FARC adhered to a relatively strict moral code emphasising self-defence and the protection of rural communities (Aguilera, 2013; Estrada, 2014). Violence was justified within the context of defending peasants from state aggression, and this defensive posture imposed some ethical constraints on how FARC engaged in combat, in the words of Maria, "I remember my first commander, the man who brought me into this whole process; he used to tell us, it's very simple to fire a rifle, to learn to handle a weapon mechanically, but the intellectual content, the literary content, the classics, the study of the classics that is the essence of each bullet. That is the essence of each shot because it is a shot of love in defence of our people" (Former Combatant FARC, 2023b).

The Fifth and Sixth Conferences (1974 and 1978) further emphasised political education, disciplined recruitment, and the creation of detailed regulatory codes to govern behaviour within the organisation (FARC, 1974; 1978). While these codes formalised normative constraints on violence, evidence suggests they were applied unevenly, with rank-and-file soldiers held to stricter standards than commanders, reflecting internal hierarchies. According to Pedro, "FARC had a regulation that was applied more strictly to the rank-and-file guerrillas, there is no solid evidence to suggest exemplary sanctions, for example, against people who held command roles" (Expert FARC, 2024) there was a differentiated application of the in-

ternal rules based on the position and ranking within the organisation, the commanders were allowed to break the rules. In contrast, the rank-and-file soldiers were obliged by the regulations and the internal norms. This has been analysed by authors such as Aguilera (2013), and it is part of the transitional justice process in Colombia.

The 1980s marked a significant shift in FARC's strategic ambitions. At the Seventh Conference in 1982, FARC rebranded itself as the "FARC-EP" (People's Army)[9], signalling its transformation into a military force with offensive objectives and national aspirations as its primary goals. This period saw the group expand its operations, establish "Bolivarian" fronts, and engage in national-level politics (Pecaut and González, 1997; Villamizar, 2017). The revised strategy reflected a matured vision for revolutionary change, emphasising both military expansion and political engagement (FARC, 1982).

In 1993, the break with the Colombian Communist Party marked a pivotal ideological departure, as FARC sought to reassert its independence and broaden its appeal. This shift allowed FARC to frame itself as a uniquely Colombian revolutionary movement, distinct from external communist affiliations. However, it also marked a more pragmatic turn, as FARC increasingly relied on practices like kidnappings and narcotrafficking to finance its operations, prioritising strategic needs over ideological purity (Aguilera, 2016; Expert ELN, 2024), according to Ema, "in the case of the FARC; for example, the split with the Communist Party after the bombings of the Casa Verde was extremely evident. In fact, they made it public. From then, they had to start doing things 'in-house,' so to speak, recruiting people in the cities through recruitment processes and political-military training schools"(Expert ELN, 2024). This period, marked by intensified violence and forced recruitment, represented a tension between revolutionary ideals and the practicalities of sustaining the insurgency.

In the 2000s, FARC began to emphasize mass politics and socialism as part of a broader strategy to integrate urban populations into its movement. At the Ninth Conference in 2007, the group reframed its struggle as a national movement against neoliberalism and

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[9]Ejército del Pueblo (EP) in Spanish.

imperialism, seeking to unify rural and urban constituencies under a shared vision for societal transformation (FARC, 2007). This ideological expansion was accompanied by the creation of the Clandestine Communist Colombian Party (PC3), which sought to mobilise political support alongside military efforts. In the words of David, "While the FARC had resisted the paramilitary offensive in various areas of the country, it is also true that they had lost urban areas and managed to hold onto rural areas. In contrast, the ELN was swept away by the paramilitary offensive between 1997 and 2001. This paramilitary offensive led to a degradation of the war and a sharp increase in intensive recruitment.(Expert Peace Process, 2023). However, FARC's continued use of violence and coercion during this period highlighted ongoing contradictions within its ideological framework, as the group struggled to balance revolutionary imperatives with the need for political legitimacy (Giraldo, 2014; Villamizar, 2017).

FARC's ideological evolution exemplifies the complexity of micro-ideological changes within a peasant Marxist-Leninist framework. Unlike other leftist insurgencies, FARC's trajectory reveals how conflict framing, goals, and constraints are deeply interconnected and responsive to both internal needs and external pressures. The establishment of ideological schools and the later adoption of mass politics reflect a dual strategy of ideological consolidation and political expansion. Additionally, its break from the Communist Party illustrates FARC's desire to redefine itself within the Colombian conflict, emphasising both ideological independence and pragmatic adaptations.

National Liberation Army (ELN)

The National Liberation Army (ELN)[10], was founded in 1965 in the Magdalena Medio region of Santander, Colombia. Initially composed of peasants and students from the Industrial University of Santander, the ELN was inspired by the Cuban Revolution and promoted a nationalist, anti-oligarchic agenda (Aguilera, 2003; Broderick, 2000; Villamizar, 2017). In

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[10]In Spanish: Ejército de Liberación Nacional

their first manifesto, the Simacota Program, the ELN declared:

> The revolutionary struggle is the only way for all the people to overthrow the current government of deceit and violence. We, the National Liberation Army group, find ourselves fighting for the liberation of Colombia. The liberal and conservative people will face together to defeat the oligarchy of both parties. Long live the unity of peasants, workers, students, professionals and honest people who want to make Colombia a worthy homeland for honest Colombians! Liberation or death! (ELN, 1965).

From the outset, the ELN framed the conflict as a revolution, following the example of the Cuban Revolution, with the ultimate goal of creating a new state. One notable difference from other guerrilla movements is the ultimate call of "liberation or death"[11] in their slogan, in contrast with FARC's call of "Resist or triumph"[12]. The ELN with the goal of the revolutionary fight do not accept middle points. According to Marta: "They have always had complex goals, liberation or death. It's like they're missing a goal along the lines of putting on the table: we want the planet's climate to cool down, and until that happens, we won't lay down our arms" (Expert ELN, 2024). This transcendental element was reinforced by the recruitment of Catholic priests, who brought with them a unique set of normative constraints based on the interpretation of Liberation Theology (Bustos-Zamora, 2020) and a religious justification for the revolution.

In the Simacota Program, the ELN positioned itself as a labour-driven movement opposing imperialism and the Colombian government. They called for nationalisation, protectionism, and economic centralisation. The ELN also imposed normative constraints on participation in illegal activities, such as the drug trade, and committed to defending patriotic interests without becoming instruments of repression against any nation (ELN, 1965).

The conflict goal of the ELN, similar to FARC, was the overthrow of the government

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[11]ELN slogan is Liberación o muerte in Spanish
[12]FARC slogan was Resistir o vencer in Spanish

and the creation of a new Marxist state. However, their focus is on uniting various social classes and sectors and incorporating elements of Liberation Theology in their origins (Bustos-Zamora, 2020; Villamizar, 2017). This religious influence became part of their micro-ideology, shaping their normative constraints. Unlike FARC, the ELN's ideological framework rejected certain forms of violence, such as participation in the drug trade, and imposed moral limitations based on Catholic principles (Broderick, 1977; 2000).

This ideological distinction between the two groups demonstrates how different factors, such as religious influence, can lead to divergent micro-ideologies even within the same ideological family. The ELN's normative constraints were informed by both Marxist and Christian values, differentiating their ideological stance from FARC's more secular Marxist-Leninist orientation.

The initial framing of the ELN's struggle was heavily influenced by the priest Camilo Torres and the Cuban Revolution. This version of Marxism was unique in its moral and religious justification for violence. It portrayed the struggle against the Colombian state as a righteous battle for the poor, blessed by Christian principles: "The people have no alternative but to take up arms to win their freedom and well-being; it is a logical response of the people to a war that has been imposed on them. From this perspective, violence is legitimate when carried out in defence of an entire people" (Dirección Nacional del Ejército De Liberación Nacional [DN-ELN], 1986). The movement presented itself as a defender of social justice, invoking a spiritual duty to fight inequality and oppression.

Between 1973 and 1998, ELN's Christian Marxist ideology imposed moral constraints on violence. Inspired by Liberation Theology, the movement viewed violence as a necessary evil, justified only as a means to liberate the oppressed. These ethical considerations were grounded in a Christian ethos, emphasising the protection of the poor and minimising harm to innocents.

> A new dimension of revolutionary Christians is opening up; the Central American
> revolutions demonstrate that a new society can be built with the active participa-

tion of Christians. In Popular Power, Christians see the presence of the Kingdom of God. It is becoming clear that Latin America is not divided between Christians and Marxists, but rather between revolutionaries and defenders of the capitalist system. (Dirección Nacional Unión Camilista Ejército de Liberación Nacional [DN-UCELN], 1989)

As ELN evolved, especially after the death of the former priest and commander Manuel Perez in 1998, it gradually distanced itself from religious inspirations. The conflict narrative shifted to a more orthodox Marxist-Leninist framework, emphasising class struggle and revolutionary socialism: "The weapons are not in the hands of the ELN because we want war for the sake of war, but because the political path we want to take, to seek change in the country, such as social justice, democracy, and respect for human rights, has not been possible through political means. History has already shown this through the genocide against political and popular leaders. Simply put, with weapons, we have defended our lives and our ideals." (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN, 2005). Its sharper "us vs. them" dichotomy portrayed the state as a capitalist oppressor without the earlier religious undertones.

The emphasis shifted to achieving socialist objectives by any means necessary, expanding the permissible scope of violence to include more aggressive tactics, such as economic sabotage and attacks on infrastructure, and kidnappings. According to the ELN "we have said that the ELN does not conduct kidnappings but rather detentions. Both share the common denominator of involving deprivation of liberty, but their motivations and methods are different"(Dirección Nacional Unión Camilista Ejército de Liberación Nacional [DN-UCELN], 1996).

The ELN has maintained a rigid anti-electoral stance, rejecting political participation and abstaining from any form of engagement with the political system until 2005. This ideological framing positions the ELN in stark contrast to groups like FARC, portraying political participation as a betrayal of revolutionary purity. The ELN's narrative continued to emphasise the illegitimacy of the Colombian state and the futility of participating in its

institutions:

> First of all, the ELN will not have candidates. Our participation lies in the realm of ideas, in collective reflection with the country, and in aligning with many in this search for a future. It is a path that has opened up in the country, and we find common ground with what many are thinking and doing, even though, due to our insurgent nature, we cannot directly support it in the way we would like. Of course, we fear what might happen to a candidate chosen by the national country (Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN, 2005)

The ELN held strict prohibitions against participating in the drug trade, viewing it as incompatible with revolutionary ethics. However, as financial pressures mounted, they began taxing narcotic production. This shift reflected a pragmatic adaptation of their goals, prioritising survival and financial sustainability over ideological purity. By embracing taxation to narcotrafficking production, ELN demonstrated the tension between ideological commitments and operational necessities.

> The ELN has no crops, no laboratories, no routes, and does not trade in these products; it has no airstrips and does not provide security to anyone, nor does it have anything to do with the business of chemical precursors. The only thing it does in some areas is collect a tax, as with any economic activity, a tax on the merchants. No type of consumption or distribution is allowed in the areas under our influence. To corroborate this, no ELN member has ever been, nor will ever be, detained with a gram of these substances. We say that we collect in some areas because, in several of them, we have promoted the voluntary and gradual eradication of crops to replace them with other types of agricultural production, as happened in Arauca.(Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN, 2010)

This decision underscored the group's prioritisation of financial gain over ideological purity. While engaging in narcotrafficking taxation allowed ELN to sustain their insurgency, it

also exposed the tension between revolutionary ideals and practical survival, illustrating how normative constraints can erode under operational pressures. According to Ana, "I would say the goal was strategic. All three the ELN, the PCML, and the EPL advocated for socialism, not for tomorrow, but as a strategic objective. It was not the proposal of the M-19. The M-19 had nationalist ideas and never spoke of abolishing private property. So, I think that, at the time, this was crucial. For that moment in time" (Expert EPL, 2024)

The steadfast commitment to abstentionism and rejection of political participation underscores ELN's ideological rigidity compared to groups like FARC, which adapted to include political engagement. This abstentionism reflects a deep-seated distrust of the Colombian state and a belief in the futility of electoral politics. The analysis also reveals the complex interplay between ideological commitments and operational realities, showing how ELN's normative constraints evolved in response to financial and strategic pressures.

The micro-ideology of the ELN demonstrates the complex interplay between Marxist principles, Liberation Theology, and pragmatic adaptations to operational challenges. This framework highlights the dynamic ways in which ideology shapes not only the group's goals but also its methods and constraints. The ELN's early integration of Christian values and revolutionary ethics distinguished it from other guerrilla groups, emphasising moral justifications for violence and a strict rejection of practices like narcotrafficking. However, as the movement evolved, operational pressures necessitated compromises, such as taxing narcotics production, reflecting a tension between ideological purity and survival. The ELN's commitment to abstentionism and its staunch anti-electoral stance underscores its ideological rigidity, contrasting with the adaptability of groups like FARC. By examining these micro-ideological shifts, we can understand how the ELN's identity and strategies have been shaped by both enduring ideological commitments and the pragmatic realities of prolonged insurgency.

Popular Liberation Army (EPL)

The Popular Liberation Army (EPL) of Colombia was founded in 1967 as the armed wing of the Colombian Communist Marxist-Leninist Party (Calvo, 1985; Villamizar, 2017). EPL's micro-ideology reveals the complexity of maintaining revolutionary commitments while navigating a protracted civil war.

At its inception in 1965, as part of the Marxist-Leninist Communist Colombian Party, EPL framed its struggle in explicitly Maoist terms, emphasising a peasant-led revolution against imperialism and capitalist exploitation: "The revolution will be armed, and the main stage will be the countryside. All Marxist-Leninists united in a single party, all popular fighters in a single revolutionary army, all revolutionaries in a single Patriotic Front of Liberation" (Partido Comunista de Colombia Marxista-Leninista, 1965). The conflict was portrayed as a continuation of global anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements. EPL established a clear "us versus them" narrative, positioning the Colombian state as an instrument of imperialism. This framing sought to mobilise rural populations by highlighting class struggle and the promise of agrarian reform.

EPL's early objectives were heavily inspired by Maoist strategy.

> Our revolution is patriotic, popular, anti-imperialist, and on the path to socialism. Its essence is that of a New Democracy, as defined by comrade Mao Zedong in 1939, with a political regime that is the dictatorship of the union of revolutionary classes. It is part of the global proletarian revolution, not a bourgeois revolution. In this, the proletariat holds the hegemony, and its subsequent goal is socialism.(Partido Comunista de Colombia Marxista-Leninista – Ejército de Liberación Nacional, 1967)

They emphasised a protracted people's war aimed at overthrowing the Colombian government and establishing a socialist state. The focus was on rural insurgency, agrarian reform, and the establishment of revolutionary control zones. The group's long-term vision involved

creating a classless, agrarian society free from capitalist and imperialist influence.

EPL's use of violence was initially guided by Maoist doctrine, which emphasised the necessity of violence in the context of a peasant revolution (Calvo, 1985; Villamizar, 2017). However, Maoist ideology also imposed certain ethical constraints, such as the need to gain peasant support and avoid unnecessary violence against rural populations:

> Initially, we were involved in activities such as controlling prices on food and livestock, officiating marriages, and legalising divorces and baptisms. We organised popular militias and local guerrillas to defend the villages and even provided protection to small traders in the region who conducted basic exchanges.(Partido Comunista de Colombia Marxista-Leninista – Ejército de Liberación Nacional, 1972).

The group maintained a disciplined approach to violence, focusing on state targets and strategic objectives rather than widespread civilian attacks. The group gradually moderated its Maoist rhetoric as EPL encountered operational challenges and witnessed changing political dynamics in Colombia.

> From 1978 to 1980, an in-depth ideological discussion took place within the organisation, a serious questioning of our past experiences. As a result, at the XI Party Congress held in April. We broke away from Maoism and its harmful influence on our activities. Thanks to the correct work done, first in theory and then in practical activities, we were able to overcome negative situations and project ourselves toward the future in better conditions (Partido Comunista de Colombia Marxista-Leninista – Ejército de Liberación Nacional, 1980).

The framing became less ideologically rigid and focused on pragmatic alliances, including occasional cooperation with other leftist groups such as the Communist Party of Albania. This shift reflected an attempt to broaden their appeal and adapt to the evolving landscape of

Colombian insurgency, emphasising unity among leftist factions rather than strict adherence to Maoist doctrine.

With limited success and increasing pressure from the state and rival groups, EPL began reconsidering its long-term objectives (Calvo, 1985). The goal shifted from a strict Maoist revolution to a broader, more flexible vision of socialist change. This included engagement in dialogues about potential political solutions, reflecting a willingness to compromise on earlier, uncompromising goals. According to Ana, "EPL began to explore pathways to legitimacy through negotiation and alliances with other leftist insurgencies" (Expert EPL, 2024).

As EPL's operational context became more complex, the group occasionally relaxed these ethical constraints to sustain its insurgency, "in 1972, the IV Plenary of the Central Committee was held, during which kidnapping was approved, and a new mode of operation was proposed" (Partido Comunista de Colombia Marxista-Leninista – Ejército de Liberación Nacional, 1972) The need for funding and territorial control led to pragmatic decisions, such as engaging in kidnappings and extortion.

Like the ELN, the EPL had an abstentionist position and a rejection of political participation in elections "for reformist and economistic struggle, a disciplined organisation of revolutionaries is certainly not required. Those who still aspire to the parliamentary path are obviously not interested in a Party with a selective membership, but rather a 'mass Party' that can offer a substantial number of votes"(Partido Comunista de Colombia Marxista-Leninista – Ejército de Liberación Nacional, 1980).

Between 1980 and 1990, EPL began framing the conflict in terms of peace and reconciliation, "in 1982 or '83, after the M-19 proposed a process of negotiation and peace, the EPL and PCML joined that proposal. This was the clearest indication that there had been a change in political approach and strategy" (Expert EPL, 2024). This narrative shift culminated in their eventual demobilisation and reintegration into civilian life in 1991. The emphasis was placed on the futility of prolonged violence and the need for a political solution, reflecting a complete transformation from their original revolutionary rhetoric (Villamizar, 2017;

2019). This final reframing aimed to present EPL as a legitimate political actor committed to national peace.

The decision to demobilise in 1991 marked a radical shift in EPL's conflict goals. The group abandoned the armed struggle and sought political reintegration, prioritising peace and political activism within the existing democratic framework. This new goal "emphasised social and political change through non-violent means, aligning with broader efforts for national reconciliation in Colombia" (Partido Comunista de Colombia Marxista-Leninista – Ejército de Liberación Nacional, 1990). EPL's focus shifted entirely from revolution to active participation in Colombia's evolving political landscape.

The initial adoption of Maoist doctrine set EPL apart from other Colombian insurgencies, emphasising rural mobilisation and peasant-based revolution. However, the group's gradual shift toward moderation and eventual demobilisation highlights the impact of sustained conflict and changing political conditions on ideological commitments. EPL's transition from rigid Maoist principles to pragmatic engagement and, finally, to peaceful reintegration underscores the complexity of ideological adaptation in protracted civil wars.

The micro-ideology of the EPL exemplifies the fluidity and adaptability of insurgent ideologies within protracted conflicts. Initially grounded in strict Maoist principles, the EPL's emphasis on a peasant-led revolution and agrarian reform reflected a deep commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideals. However, as the group confronted operational challenges, shifting political dynamics, and internal debates, it gradually evolved its ideological framework. This transformation, from rigid Maoist orthodoxy to a more flexible socialist vision and ultimately to demobilisation, highlights the interplay between ideological commitments and pragmatic adaptations. The EPL's eventual shift toward peace and political participation demonstrates how insurgent groups navigate the tension between maintaining ideological purity and responding to the realities of prolonged conflict. By analysing the EPL's micro-ideological trajectory, we can understand how insurgent groups redefine their goals, strategies, and normative constraints in response to both internal and external pressures, underscoring the

importance of micro-ideology in understanding insurgent behaviour and conflict outcomes.

Micro-ideologies in Colombian Guerrillas

The utility of micro-ideologies lies in their ability to bridge theoretical analysis and practical applications. Understanding how conflict framing shapes a group's identity and justification for violence, how conflict goals guide their long-term strategies, and how normative constraints influence their tactical decisions can inform tailored peacebuilding initiatives and counterinsurgency strategies. For example, distinguishing FARC's strategic flexibility from ELN's ideological rigidity helps to explain their divergent responses to peace negotiations. Similarly, understanding EPL's eventual embrace of reconciliation highlights how shifts in micro-ideology can open pathways to political reintegration.

Moreover, micro-ideologies offer a dynamic lens through which to analyse how groups respond to internal pressures and external contexts. The adaptation of normative constraints, such as FARC and ELN's pragmatic involvement in narcotrafficking, reflects the tension between ideological commitments and operational survival. These shifts are often invisible when groups are categorised solely by their broad ideological affiliations. By focusing on micro-ideologies, we can track how ideological elements evolve in response to protracted conflict, leadership changes, or resource constraints.

The ideological competition, driven by their distinct micro-ideologies, illustrates the broader theoretical argument, that micro-ideological variation within rebel groups influences both intra-group relations and interactions with external actors. The Colombian Civil War case study demonstrates how the proposed framework of conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints can be used to analyse ideological variation within rebel groups that share the same broad ideological family. Despite their shared Marxist background, FARC, ELN, and EPL developed unique micro-ideologies that shaped their behaviour, goals, and use of violence. This analysis underscores the importance of moving beyond broad ideological labels to understand rebel groups' internal dynamics and strategic choices in multi-actor civil

wars.

Regarding conflict framing, all three groups framed their struggle against the Colombian state as a fight against imperialism, capitalist exploitation, and oppression. They emphasised the moral legitimacy of their armed struggle, portraying the state as a corrupt and oppressive entity serving elite and foreign interests. However, FARC's framing emphasised rural peasantry and agrarian reform as central themes. Their conflict narrative evolved to include mass politics and socialism, especially in later conferences, aiming to mobilise a broad base beyond rural areas. Initially influenced by Liberation Theology, the ELN's conflict framing had a unique Christian-Marxist element. This spiritual justification for revolution distinguished ELN from the more secular FARC and EPL. Over time, ELN secularised its narrative but maintained a moralistic and ideological rigidity, emphasising the illegitimacy of political engagement with the Colombian state.

On the other hand, EPL adopted a strict Maoist framing early on, emphasising a peasant-led revolution and rural insurgency. Unlike FARC and ELN, EPL's rhetoric was heavily influenced by Maoism, framing the struggle as a protracted people's war. As EPL moderated over time, its framing became more pragmatic, eventually emphasising peace and national reconciliation.

All three groups shared the long-term conflict goal of overthrowing the Colombian government and establishing a socialist state. Their strategies included both military and political components, although the emphasis varied. FARC and EPL, in particular, emphasised rural insurgency and peasant mobilisation as strategies, reflecting the influence of agrarian-based revolutionary ideologies. The key difference is that over time, FARC's goals expanded to include strategic political engagement, such as mass mobilisation and forming political movements. This strategic flexibility differentiated them from ELN and reflected a willingness to adapt their vision to changing circumstances. ELN maintained an ideological rigidity, consistently rejecting political participation and electoral engagement. Their conflict goals remained focused on armed struggle and class revolution, even as other groups considered

negotiations or political solutions. This abstentionist stance underscored ELN's commitment to revolutionary purity and rejection of the Colombian political system. EPL's goals shifted significantly over time. Initially committed to a strict Maoist vision, they later embraced peace and political reintegration, dramatically departing from their original revolutionary objectives. This pragmatic shift set EPL apart from both FARC and ELN, who maintained the armed struggle for longer periods.

All three groups imposed certain ethical limitations on violence early in their existence, often influenced by ideological principles. For example, FARC and EPL focused on targeting state forces rather than civilians, and ELN's religious inspiration initially guided their ethical approach to violence. All three groups had to adapt their normative constraints as the conflict persisted. This included pragmatic decisions to engage in practices like kidnappings, extortion, or involvement in the drug trade to finance their insurgencies. While FARC engaged in narcotrafficking and other forms of economic violence, they maintained a justification rooted in revolutionary necessity. Over time, their ethical boundaries became more flexible as they sought to sustain their operations, reflecting the tension between ideology and survival. ELN was initially guided by a Christian ethos that placed moral restrictions on violence. However, as they secularised, these constraints weakened, and they engaged in more aggressive tactics.

Ultimately, micro-ideologies allow us to move beyond static categorisations and recognise rebel groups as fluid and adaptive entities. The Colombian Civil War demonstrates how this approach provides a clearer, more detailed picture of how rebel groups function, paving the way for better analysis and engagement in diverse conflict settings. These findings support that within a single ideological family rebel groups exhibit different micro-ideologies based on their conflict framing, conflict goals and normative constraints.

Dimension	FARC	ELN	EPL
Conflict Framing	Focused on rural peasantry and agrarian reform; evolved to include socialism and mass mobilisation. Framed the state as corrupt and serving elite/foreign interests.	Initially influenced by Liberation Theology with a Christian-Marxist element; secularised over time but retained moralistic rigidity against state engagement.	Emphasised Maoist framing with a focus on peasant-led revolution and rural insurgency. Over time, shifted to more pragmatic framing emphasising peace and reconciliation.
Conflict Goals	Aimed to overthrow the government and establish a socialist state. Expanded goals to include political engagement and forming political movements.	Focused on armed struggle and class revolution. Rejected political participation or electoral engagement, emphasising revolutionary purity.	Initially pursued a strict Maoist vision for revolution; later shifted toward peace and political reintegration, departing from revolutionary objectives.
Normative Constraints	Early focus on targeting state forces and avoiding civilian harm. Gradually became more flexible, engaging in narcotrafficking and extortion under revolutionary necessity.	Early Christian ethos imposed moral restrictions on violence. These weakened over time, leading to more aggressive tactics as secularisation occurred.	Targeted state forces and avoided civilian harm early on. Shifted to pragmatic engagement in violence for survival, emphasising reconciliation in later stages.

Table 3.2: Micro-ideologies in Colombian Guerrillas

3.5.2 Machine Learning for Micro-Ideological Analysis

To validate and test the findings about micro-ideologies provided by the qualitative approach, I used supervised machine learning classification on 6,056 documents from 59 rebel organisations in Latin America[13]. This method helps to identify variations in the micro-ideology of each group over time and reveals distinct ideological positions. Also, this approach provides a dynamic understanding of micro-ideology, showing it as a characteristic that can evolve rather than remain static.

To better understand the evolution of the micro-ideologies over time, the following figures illustrate the yearly distribution of the categories extracted from the supervised classification of the texts [14]. These visualisations show both continuities and changes in the conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints in the organisations of the corpus.
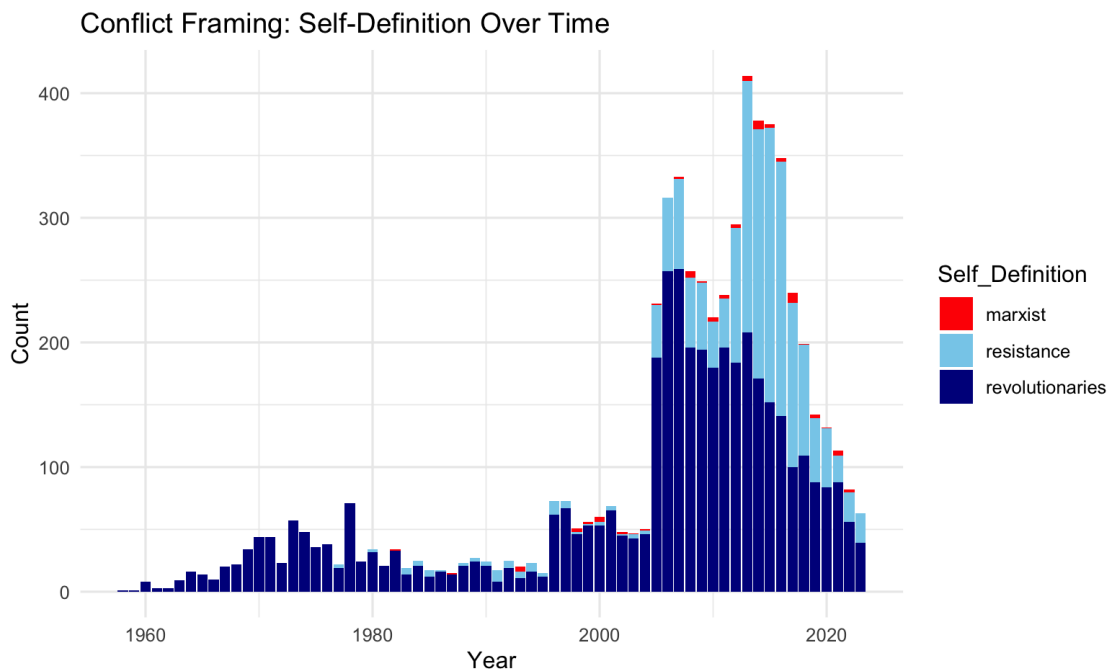

Figure 3.1: Conflict Framing: Self-Definition Over Time

Figure 3.1 focuses on how organisations describe themselves ideologically. The label "rev-

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[13]A summary of the performance of the classification can be found in the Appendix.
[14]The codebook can be found in the Appendix.

olutionaries" dominates early periods and remains stable throughout. However, the increase of "resistance" as a self-definition, particularly post-2010 indicates a micro-ideological repositioning. The term "Marxist" appears rarely and mostly in earlier decades, due to its reduced resonance in post-Cold War ideological spaces.
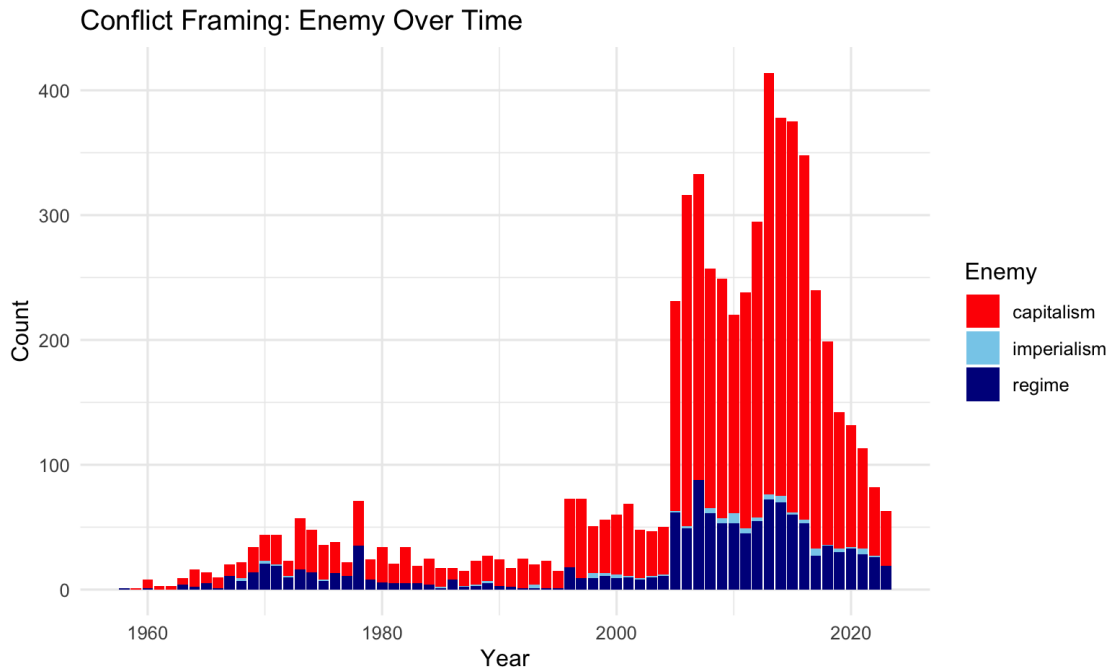
Figure 3.2: Conflict Framing: Enemy Over Time

Figure 3.2 shows how organisations have framed their primary enemies over time. "Capitalism" emerges as the most persistent and dominant target across the decades, with a notable surge after 2000. Meanwhile, framings against "the regime" have fluctuated but remained significant. "Imperialism", while rhetorically present, shows far less prominence.
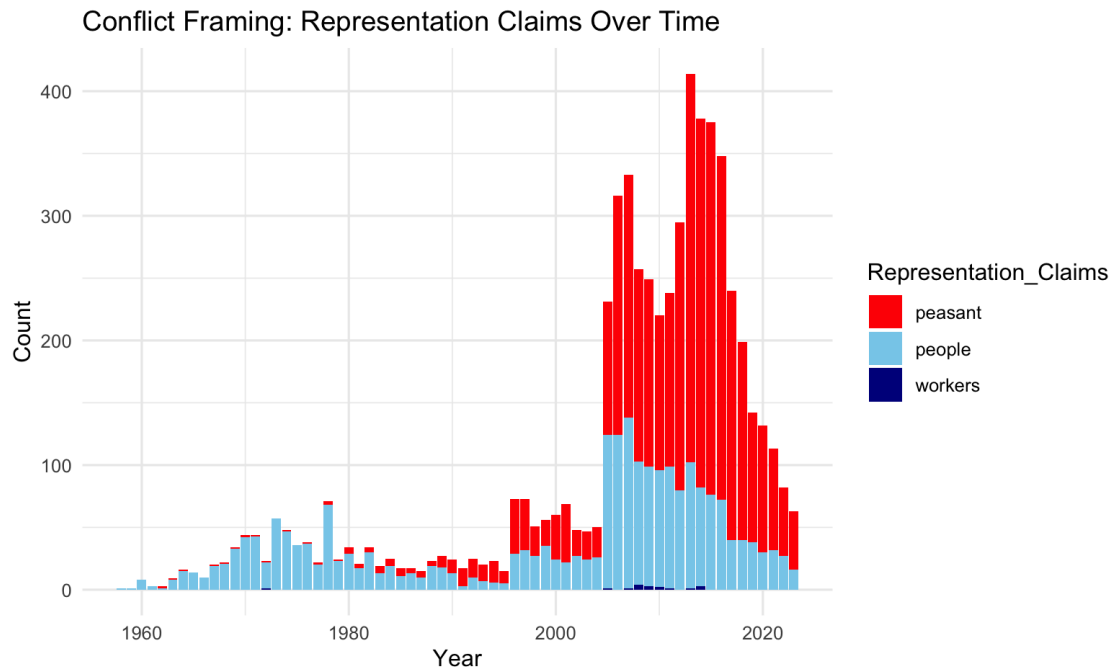
Figure 3.3: Conflict Framing: Representation Claims Over Time

Figure 3.3 explores who is being represented in the political imaginaries of these groups. Claims to represent "the people" were more prominent before the 2000s but were eventually overtaken by claims to represent "the peasantry", especially after 2005. This reflects a strategic rural focus and response to agrarian conflict contexts. References to "the workers", although ideologically central in Marxist rhetoric, are comparatively rare, showing that Latin American rebel groups are mostly of rural origin.

Conflict Goal Over Time
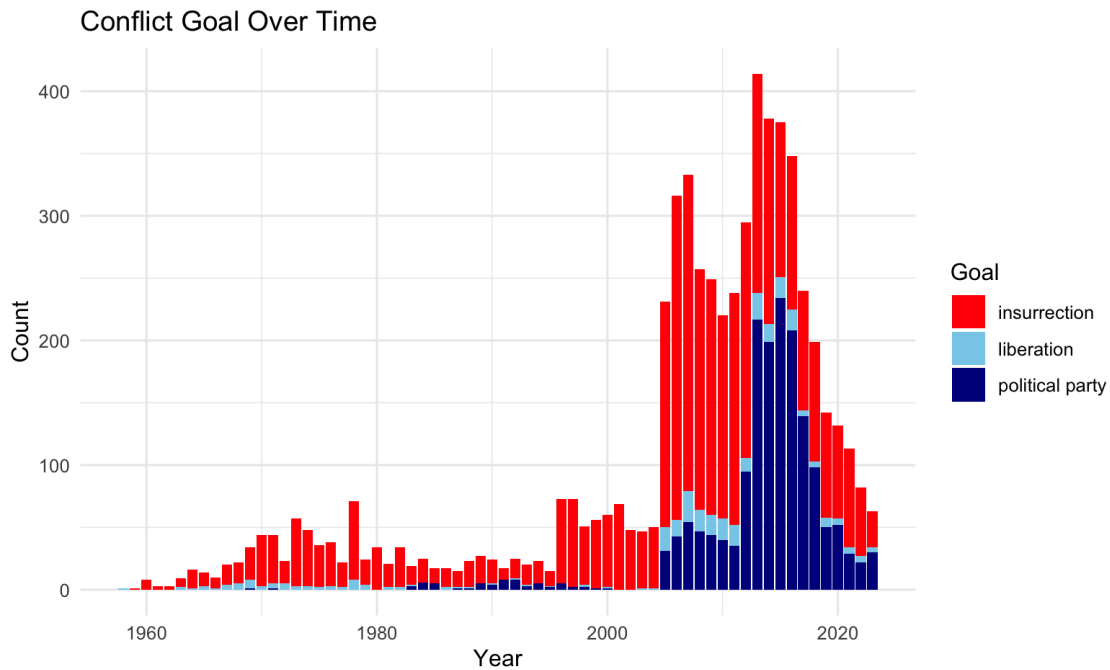
Figure 3.4: Conflict Goals Over Time

Figure 3.4 displays the evolution of conflict goals. The demand for "insurrection" dominates early and recent periods alike, showing a resurgence in the 2000s. However, the goal of forming a "political party" gained relevance particularly after 2010, suggesting a partial change towards electoral and institutional engagement. "Liberation" as a goal remained marginal across time, though not entirely absent.
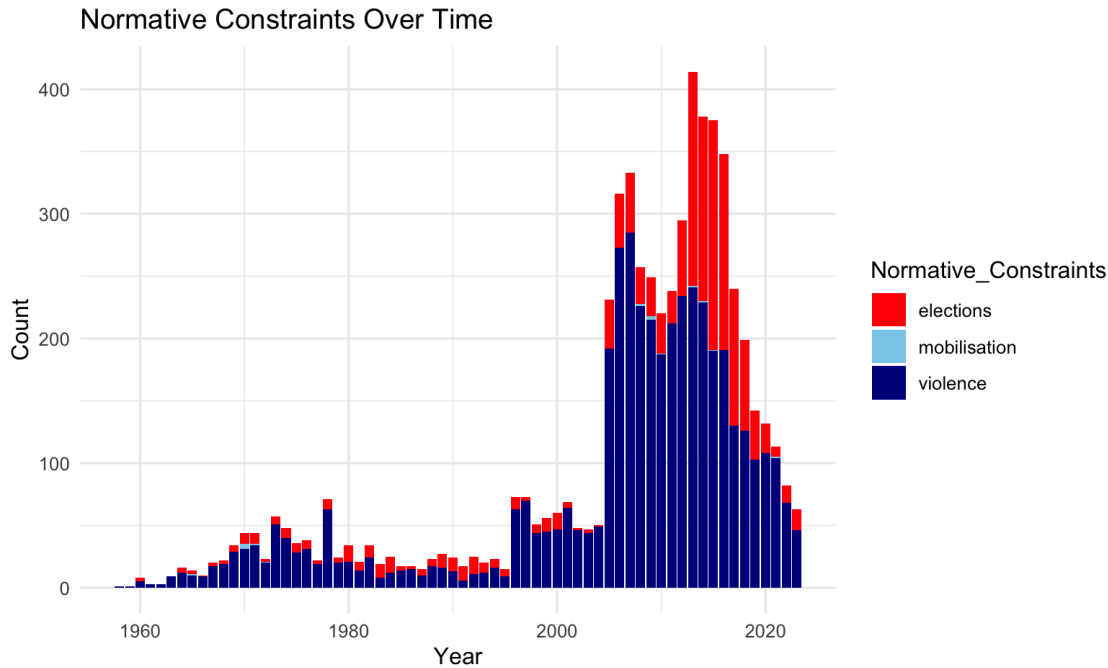
Figure 3.5: Normative Constraints Over Time

Figure 3.5 captures the normative constraints. "Violence" remains the most frequently referenced tactic and most commonly justified, particularly in recent decades. Mentions of "elections" increase around the mid-2000s, in line with a growing trend of dual strategies combining revolutionary discourse with electoral participation. "Mobilisation" appears consistently low, likely due to the rhetorical priorities evident in the texts.

Taken together, these temporal trends suggest that while certain micro-ideological framings remain persistent, such as anti-capitalism and revolution, others such as electoral participation and peasant representation have gained prominence in response to changing political opportunities and conflict contexts. This dynamic evolution of ideology provides further support for the relevance of micro-ideologies as a framework of analysis.

I also analysed the micro-ideological classification in different organisations. The following figures show the results of the supervised classification for the ten organisations with the most documents in the corpus, along with the proportion of the distribution of each micro-ideological dimension.
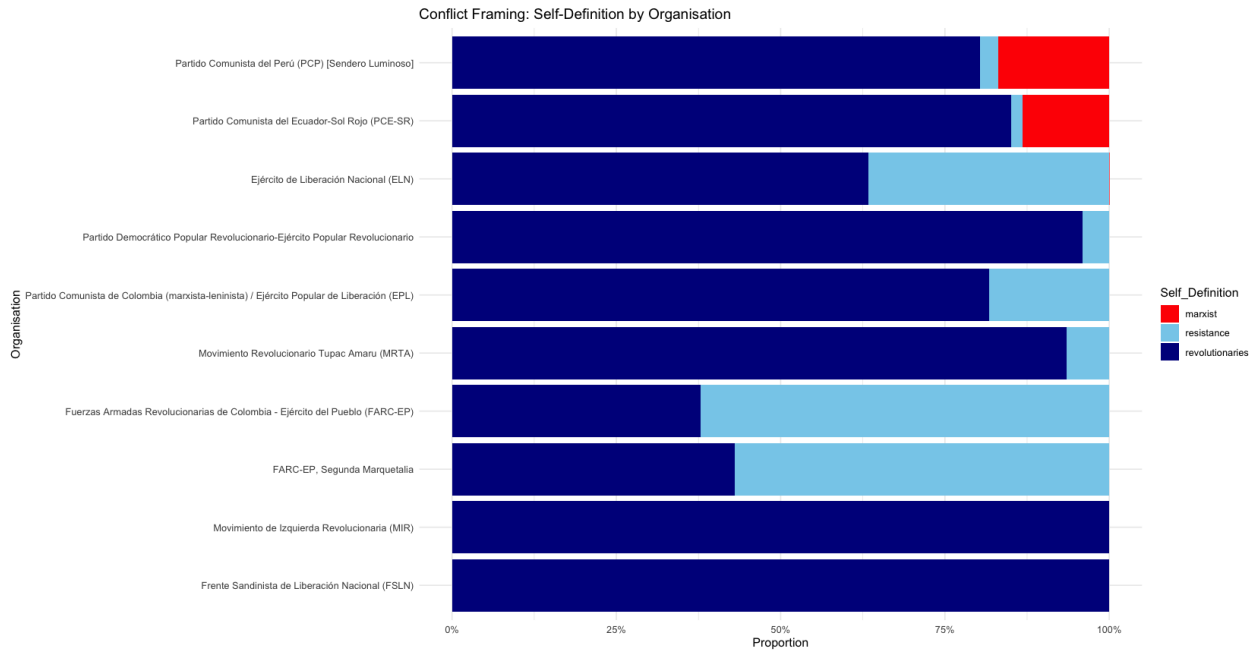
Figure 3.6: Conflict Framing: Self-Definition by Organisation

Figure 3.6 focuses on conflict framing self-definition. The terms "revolutionary" and "resistance" dominate, with Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR) and Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), where nearly 100% of references use the revolutionary label. Some organisations demonstrate more variation. Notably, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC-EP), the FARC-EP Segunda Marquetalia, and Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) present a more balanced mix of revolutionaries and resistance framing. The use of "Marxist" appears only among the Partido Comunista del Perú (PCP) [Sendero Luminoso] and the Partido Comunista del Ecuador-Sol Rojo (PCE-SR), suggesting a more explicit ideological alignment with Marxist terminology in their self-definition.
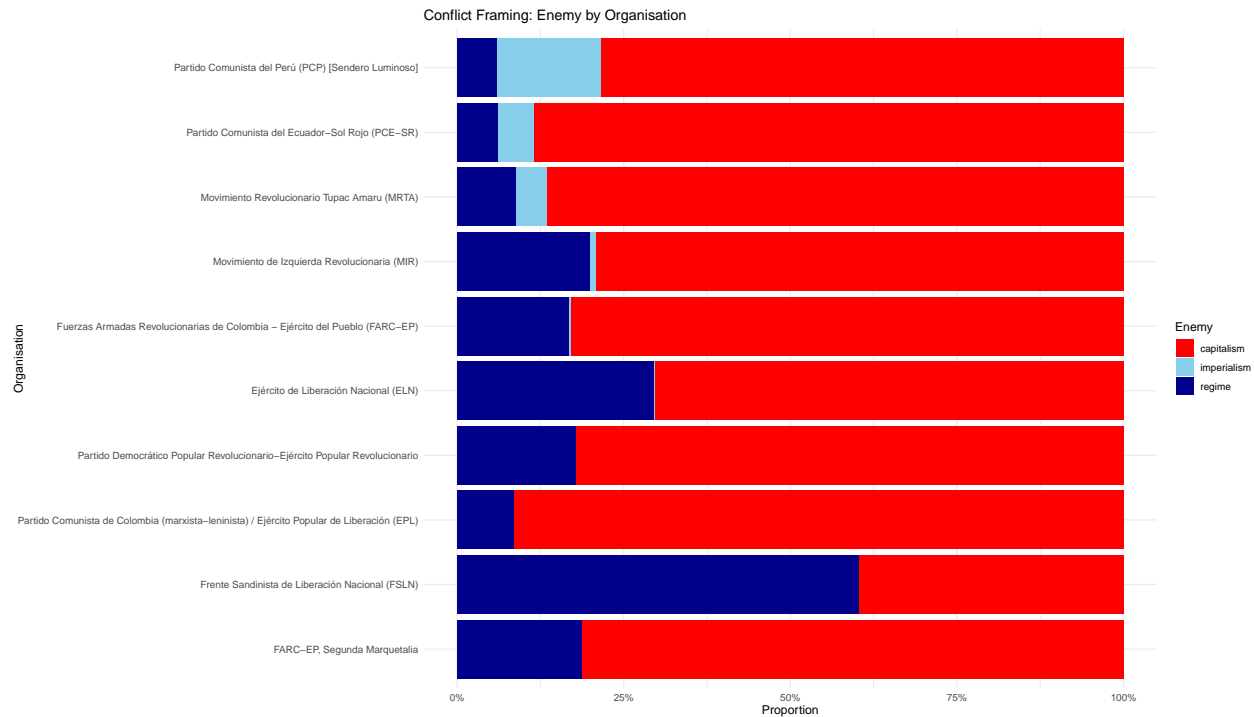
Figure 3.7: Conflict Framing: Enemy by Organisation

Figure 3.7 highlights how different organisations define their primary enemy. Overall, "capitalism" emerged as the most frequently cited enemy across the majority of organisations. Groups such as the FARC-EP Segunda Marquetalia, EPL and FARC-EP devote a significant share of their discourse to anti-capitalist framing. "Regime" is the second most prominent frame. It features in organisations like the FSLN and the ELN, indicating an emphasis on opposition to national governments and domestic political orders. "Imperialism" though present, appears less frequently overall, surfacing primarily among groups such as the Sendero Luminoso, PCE-SR and MRTA.
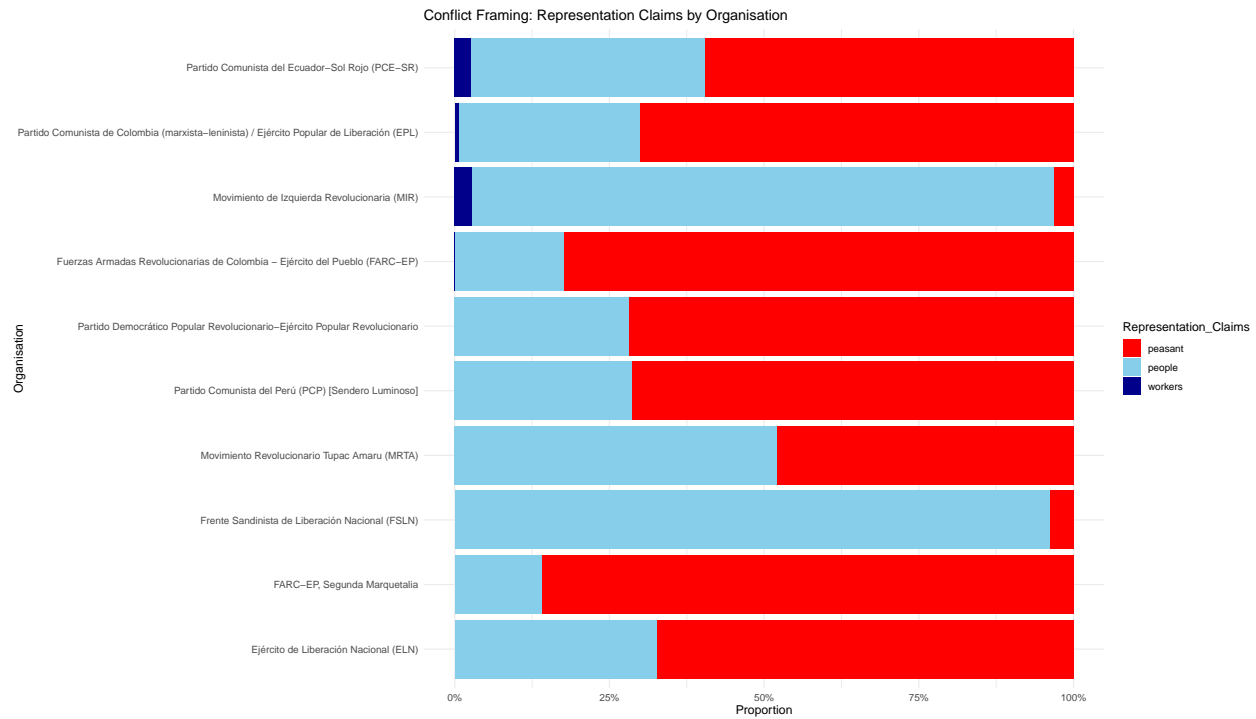
Figure 3.8: Conflict Framing: Representation Claims by Organisation

Figure 3.8 shows which social groups the organisations claim to represent. "Peasant" identity dominates across the ELN, FARC-EP, and FARC-EP Segunda Marquetalia. Organisations such as MIR, FSLN and MRTA strongly invoking representation of the "people". Claims to represent "workers" are rare and mostly peripheral. These results reflect a rural class-oriented framing of conflict, more than a strictly proletarian or urban-focused view.
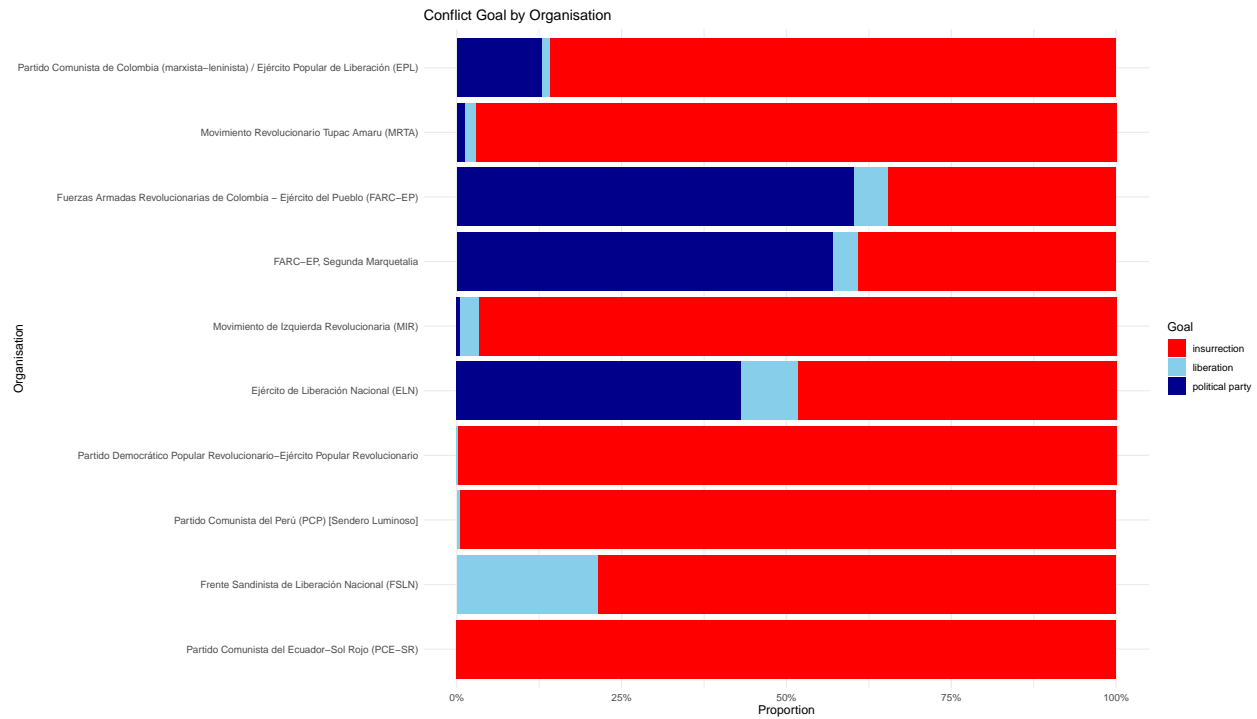
Figure 3.9: Conflict Goals by Organisation

Figure 3.9 shows the conflict goals each organisation prioritises. Most groups, including the PCP-Sendero Luminoso, MRTA, PCE-SR and Partido Democrático Popular Revolucionario, emphasise "insurrection", while the FARC-EP and ELN also show notable commitment to forming political parties. This reflects a dual-track strategy in which armed struggle coexists with institutional ambitions, particularly salient in post-Cold War Latin America.
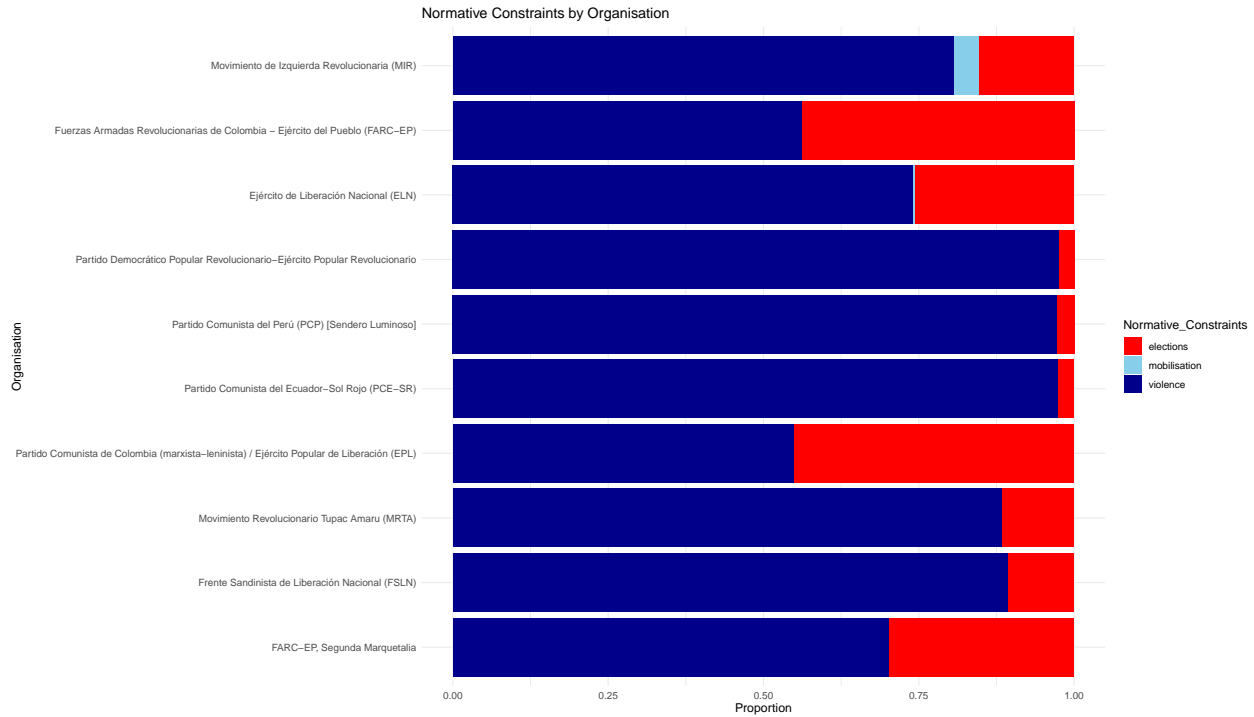
Figure 3.10: Normative Constraints by Organisation

Figure 3.10 explores normative constraints. "Violence" is widely referenced by nearly all organisations, particularly Sendero Luminoso, PCE-SR and Partido Democrático Popular Revolucionario. The calling and support for "elections" as part of the political strategy is also present in EPL, and FARC-EP pointing to hybrid insurgency-democracy strategies. "Mobilisation" remains marginal across organisations, likely due to its secondary role within the organisations' broader strategy.

To support the findings from the supervised classification and explore how micro-ideological positions reflect the distance or proximity between rebel groups in the same ideological family, I applied k-means clustering. This method grouped documents into clusters based on their ideological content, revealing patterns and proximities within the data (Grimmer et al., 2022).

The cluster analysis identified three distinct clusters to categorise the ideological positions of the analysed rebel groups. Each cluster is defined by the organisation's position in micro-ideological dimensions.
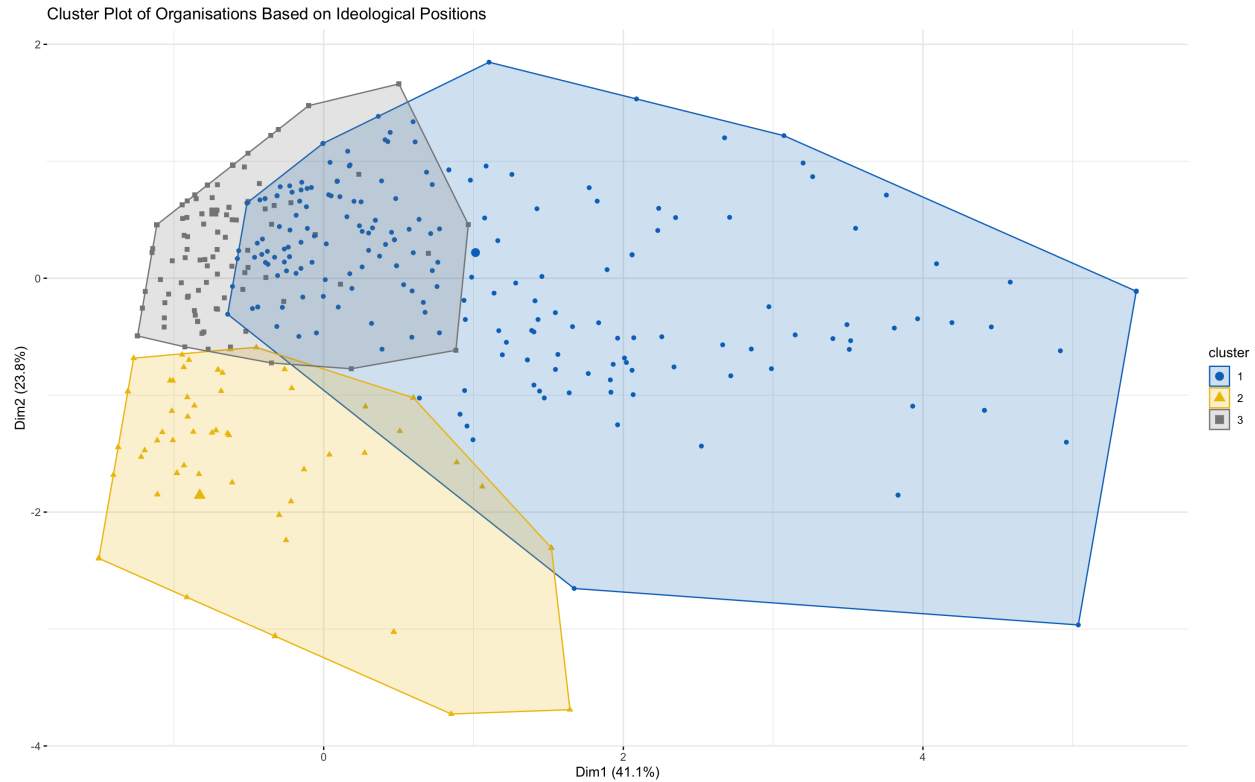
Figure 3.11: Ideological positioning

Figure 3.12 presents a scatter plot that visualises the clustering of organisations according to their micro-ideological positions. Each point represents an organisation, coloured and shaped according to the cluster it belongs to. The plot also includes the delineation of clusters using convex hulls to show the boundaries of each cluster (Grimmer et al., 2022).

The scatter plot reveals three distinct clusters of organisations based on their ideological positions. Cluster 1 (blue shade) shows the greatest spread, indicating diverse micro-ideological positions. Cluster 2 (yellow shade) shows distinct positioning, separate from the other two clusters. Cluster 3 (grey shade) is more concentrated, suggesting a specific micro-ideological stance that overlaps with some dimensions of cluster 1.

Cluster 1 is the larger cluster and includes organisations such as Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Colombia, 1964; Acción Revolucionaria Peronista (ARP), Argentina, 1959; Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, Guatemala, 1987; and Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), El Salvador, 1980. These groups

emphasise institutional issues, such as governance and long-term strategic plans to achieve their conflict goals. They focus on building organisational structures to support their political objectives. Groups in cluster 1 can be considered more radical. They define themselves as revolutionaries, advocate for violent means to achieve their objectives, identify capitalism as their primary enemy, and predominantly claim to represent the peasants.

Organisations in cluster 2 identify the regime as their main enemy and represent a broader category of the people. Unlike cluster 1, these groups may not advocate for violent means and may have a more inclusive approach to representation. Organisations in cluster 2 focus more on political party organisational structure and material class struggles. Their foundational documents present the class Marxist perspective combined with a Communist Party-style organisational strategy. This cluster includes organisations such as Partido Comunista de Colombia, Ejercito Popular de Liberación (EPL), Colombia, 1965; Partido Comunista de El Salvador (PCS), El Salvador, 1964; Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA), Peru, 1980; Acción Revolucionaria Peronista (ARP), Argentina, 1959. Organisations in this cluster share a political party origin and focus on class struggles from a Marxist perspective. They employ a dual strategy of legal political participation and illegal military action.

Groups in cluster 3 allow participation in elections, indicating a more moderate or pragmatic approach to achieving their goals. This cluster's distinguishing feature is its openness to electoral participation, which suggests a different ideological orientation compared to the other clusters. Rebel groups located in cluster 3 are characterised by a defence of social issues and the need to fight for what they described as the people's rights. In this cluster are Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR), Argentina, 1970 and Partido Democrático Popular Revolucionario-Ejército Popular Revolucionario (PDPR-EPR), Mexico, 1970. Organisations in this cluster focus on defending social issues and advocating for the rights of the people through revolutionary means. They emphasise the necessity of radical and electoral actions to achieve their socio-political objectives.

The k-means clustering effectively identified ideological proximities and distances among

the organisations, grouping them based on their micro-ideologies. The clustering results reveal patterns in how these organisations align or diverge in their micro-ideologies within the same family.

Based on the clustering results, we can conclude that the majority of the groups in the sample define themselves as revolutionaries, which does not provide enough variation for clustering based on self-definition. Similarly, as the groups in the sample share a common goal of achieving a revolution, the conflict goal is not a distinguishing factor for clustering these organisations.

I found that the main elements that differentiate the micro-ideological position and the clusters are who the group identify as their enemies and who they represent. These elements are part of conflict framing, and explain the micro-ideological positions.

This clustering reveals that even within a single ideological family, such as leftist Marxist groups, significant variations exist. These micro-ideological differences are important for understanding the unique characteristics of each group, which have implications for their operational behaviours and interactions with other actors in the conflict. The findings help validate the qualitative results, offering a more nuanced understanding of the ideological landscape of Latin American rebel groups and the potential use of micro-ideologies as an analytical category.

Machine Learning and Micro-Ideological Patterns

The machine learning component of this study provided an analytical framework to scale and systematically compare ideological patterns across a broad set of rebel organisations. Through supervised classification and clustering analysis, it was possible to validate, complement, and expand upon the findings derived from qualitative fieldwork and archival sources.

The supervised classification model allowed for the categorisation of ideological attributes across five dimensions: self-definition, representation claims, enemy identification, conflict goals, and normative constraints. This large-scale coding revealed both the dominance and

rarity of certain ideological expressions. For example, while "revolutionary" self-identification and "insurrection" as a goal were widespread, categories such as "mobilisation" or "workers" were far less common. These distributions suggest that while certain ideological positions are central to the Latin American Marxist insurgent tradition, others are either underutilised or strategically avoided in public framing.

Clustering analysis built on this foundation by grouping organisations based on the combined ideological dimensions, producing three distinct clusters of micro-ideological positioning. Cluster 1 contained groups with radical, peasant-focused rhetoric and a preference for armed struggle; Cluster 2 reflected more traditional Marxist-Leninist party strategies with regime-focused framing and dual political-military tactics; and Cluster 3 was distinguished by openness to electoral participation and a rhetorical emphasis on social justice and rights. These distinctions reinforce the idea that micro-ideologies can diverge significantly even within a shared ideological family.

The clustering results offer two analytical contributions. First, conflict framing, specifically, how groups define their enemies and represent constituencies, emerged as the primary differentiator of ideological identity. Second, dimensions such as self-definition and conflict goals, while prominent, were not sufficient to explain inter-group variation.

Moreover, the machine learning results validate the qualitative findings by identifying latent ideological structures that align with in-depth case studies. For instance, organisations like the FARC-EP, ELN, and MRTA were placed into clusters that correspond with their known strategic orientations and historical trajectories. This not only confirms the robustness of the qualitative typologies but also underscores the scalability of the micro-ideology concept.

In sum, machine learning enhanced the analysis by identifying ideological patterns across cases that may not be visible through qualitative research alone. Also, by revealing meaningful clusters of micro-ideologies that help distinguish rebel ideological positions, and by offering a replicable and generalisable method to study ideological variation in other multi-actor conflicts. These findings strengthen the argument for treating micro-ideology as an

empirical and theoretical category in the study of political violence.

3.6   Conclusion

The integration of qualitative case study, interviews and archival research with machine-learning analysis offered a comprehensive framework for examining micro-ideological evolution. The qualitative approach provided a nuanced understanding of micro-ideologies within Colombian rebel groups, while the machine-learning model expanded this by uncovering patterns and clusters across a broader dataset of Latin American rebel organisations. Together, these methods show the capacity and utility of micro-ideologies as an analytical and empirical category.

From a scholarly perspective, this study contributes to the literature on civil wars and political ideologies by providing a framework for analysing intra-ideological variation. It shows the importance of examining micro-ideologies as dynamic constructs rather than static and homogenous ideological categories. Moreover, these findings have implications for policymakers who want to design peacebuilding initiatives and counterinsurgency strategies. Tailoring interventions to the specific micro-ideologies of rebel groups can foster more effective conflict resolution and post-conflict reconciliation.

Rebel groups create ideologies to differentiate themselves from other groups and compete in a multi-actor civil war context. This process is shaped by the interaction between how they frame the conflict, present their goals, and establish normative constraints within the group. As the analysis of the Colombian case shows, several rebel groups could share some ideological aspects as part of the same ideological tradition. However, it is necessary to analyse their micro-ideological differences to understand variations in behaviour and patterns of violence.

Rebel groups can be analysed like other political actors in the way they use ideology to make political claims. In some cases, rebel groups achieved their goals and became governments. Understanding rebel groups' micro-ideologies during conflict can help explain their

governance and interactions with other actors, such as civilians. Some rebel groups' demands are embedded in their ideological motivations for transitional justice and peacebuilding. This also presents an opportunity for further research into ideological change after demobilisation and the creation of political parties.

While the study provides important findings about micro-ideologies and their variation within Marxist rebel groups, there are some limitations. In the qualitative analysis, full access to internal rebel documents was limited. This may constrain the analysis of internal ideological debates. However, the use of manifestos and interviews with former combatants and experts provides a robust basis for analysing micro-ideologies. Although the Colombian Civil War provides a valuable case for studying micro-ideologies, the findings may not be fully generalisable to all conflicts or rebel groups. For that reason, I complemented the analysis with quantitative methods that could be tested and validated in other contexts of multi-actor civil wars.

This paper has focused on identifying and categorising micro-ideologies within Latin American guerrilla movements, using conflict framing, conflict goals, and normative constraints as analytical dimensions. As a next step, future research could build on these findings by examining the relationship between micro-ideologies and rebel behaviour, for example, levels of rebel violence. Specifically, it would be valuable to investigate whether specific micro-ideological configurations correlate with reduced or increased use of violence against civilians and lower or higher attack frequency overall. A predictive model could be conceptualised in which micro-ideological trajectories are overlaid with temporal and spatial data on violent incidents, allowing for the identification of potential patterns. It would contribute to the growing body of literature on how internal ideological variation shapes rebel behaviour on the ground.

Future research should expand the application of this framework to other multi-actor conflicts, exploring how micro-ideologies manifest in different ideological families and conflict environments. By continuing to disaggregate ideology into its constituent dimensions,

scholars and practitioners can gain a deeper understanding of ideology in civil wars. Additionally, investigating how micro-ideologies evolve during post-conflict transitions could provide valuable contributions into the long-term impacts of ideological diversity on peace and stability.

Appendix 3.A   Interview Methodology

Sampling Method

The interviews were conducted using a snowball sampling method. This method was chosen due to the sensitive nature of the subject and the difficulty of accessing former combatants. Snowball sampling allowed for trust to be built with initial contacts, who then referred me to other relevant participants for the study.

This project has been reviewed and approved on behalf of Subcommittee 3 of the University of Essex: ETH2223-0355.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns were paramount in conducting these interviews. Given the potential risks to both the interviewees and the researcher, the following ethical precautions were taken:

- Informed consent: All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of their responses.

- Anonymity: To protect the identity of participants, their names are not disclosed in this study. Instead, each interview is assigned a different name as listed in the references (e.g., Juan 2023).

- Secure interview settings: For the in-person interviews, a secure and neutral location in Bogotá was chosen to ensure privacy and safety for both the participants and the researcher.

- Online interviews: Due to logistical constraints, some interviews were conducted online. In these cases, secure communication channels were used, and participants were allowed to choose their preferred mode of communication to ensure their comfort and security.

Interview Logistics

The interviews were conducted over a period spanning from January 2023 to October 2024. In-person interviews took place in Bogotá, Colombia, while online interviews were conducted using encrypted communication tools. The details of each interview are provided below:

- **Former Combatant FARC** – Male, In-person, January 18, 2023. In the text cited as Jose.

- **Former Combatant FARC** – Male, In-person, January 19, 2023. In the text cited as Juan.

- **Former Combatant FARC** – Female, In-Person, January 22, 2023.In the text cited as Maria.

- **Expert Peace Process** – Male, In-person, April 20, 2023.In the text cited as David.

- **Former Combatant M-19** – Male, Online, October 7, 2024.In the text cited as Martin.

- **Former Combatant M-19** – Male, Online, October 14, 2024.In the text cited as Mateo.

- **Expert EPL** – Female, Online, October 24, 2024.In the text cited as Ana.

- **Expert FARC** – Male, Online, October 24, 2024.In the text cited as Pedro.

- **Expert ELN** – Female, Online, October 25, 2024.In the text cited as Ema.

- **Expert M-19** – Female, Online, October 25, 2024.In the text cited as Marta.

Additionally, all interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and the recordings are stored securely, accessible only to the researcher. The interviews were later transcribed, and sensitive information was redacted when necessary to protect the identity and safety of the participants.

Appendix 3.B   Machine Learning

Pre-processing

The text-as-data analysis involves decisions that can impact the model's performance. Following the pre-processing techniques suggested by Grimmer, Roberts, and Stewart (2022), I created a text corpus using quanteda functions. The documents were then converted into tokens, underwent lower casing, punctuation removal, stop-word elimination, and an additional cleaning step, which involved removing common non-informative words like "sino", "sí", "solo", "vez", and "así". Notably, stemming and lemmatisation were not applied in this phase to preserve gender-sensitive nouns and adjectives.

To understand the composition of the clusters, the bar chart in Figure 3 shows the mean values of different ideological scales across the organisations in each one of the three clusters. The scales capture micro-ideological categories Self-definition (red), Enemy (blue), Goal (green), Representation (purple), and Constraints (orange).

Codebook: Micro-Ideology Dimensions, Sub-Dimensions, and Examples

This codebook presents the categories used for supervised classification in the analysis of rebel group documents. Each entry includes a sub-dimension under one of the three micro-ideology dimensions, a definition, a justification for inclusion, and a representative example from the dataset.

Conflict Framing

Self-definition

Marxist   The group identifies explicitly with Marxism or Marxist-Leninist ideology. It signals ideological lineage; commonly invoked by Latin American revolutionary groups. For example: "We are a Marxist-Leninist vanguard organisation committed to class struggle and proletarian revolution."

Resistance   It frames the group as resisting occupation, repression, or imperial domination. Common framing in anti-imperialist or nationalist insurgencies. For example: "Our resistance is a response to decades of military aggression and capitalist exploitation."

Revolutionaries   It describes the group as agents of radical or transformative change. Reinforces moral legitimacy and historical agency. For example "As revolutionaries, we will not rest until the corrupt elite is removed from power."

Representation Claims

People   Claims to act on behalf of "the people" in general. Broad populist language that unifies multiple grievances. For example: "We fight for the people who have been silenced, ignored, and repressed."

Workers   Appeals to the working class or labour-based identity. Core theme in socialist and Marxist movements. For example: "Our movement is grounded in the strength and will of the working class."

Peasants   Identifies rural or agrarian populations as the main constituency. Central to guerrilla organisations with rural bases. For example: "The land belongs to the peasants who work it, not to the landlords and their military protectors."

Enemy Construction

Regime   The group frames the state or ruling government as the main adversary. Standard in anti-authoritarian or anti-elite rhetoric. For example: "The corrupt regime in power has sold the country to foreign interests."

Imperialism   Identifies external or foreign domination, especially by global powers. Core component of anti-colonial and leftist ideologies. For example: "We oppose the imperialist agenda that robs our people of sovereignty."

Capitalism   Frames capitalism as an exploitative system to be dismantled. Classic Marxist critique; widely used in revolutionary discourse. For example: "Capitalism breeds inequality, misery, and dependency we oppose it in all its forms."

Conflict Goals

Political Party   The group aims to become or form part of a political party or electoral process. Indicates institutionalisation or strategic transformation. For example: "We will transform our armed struggle into a political movement with a seat at the negotiation table."

Liberation   General goal of achieving freedom, sovereignty, or emancipation. Widely used across ideological traditions; flexible framing. For example: "Our mission is national liberation, freedom from oppression and foreign control."

Revolution   The goal is to radically transform the political, economic, and social order. High-scope objectives are central to many Marxist and leftist movements. For example: "Only through revolution can we build a new society based on justice and equality."

Normative Constraints

Mobilisation   Emphasis on mass participation, popular organising, or bottom-up legitimacy. Shows the role of ideology in shaping acceptable strategies of support and legitimacy. For example: "Our strength lies in the mobilisation of communities, workers, and students."

Elections   Acknowledges or embraces electoral politics as a valid form of engagement. Signals moderation or pragmatic adaptation. For example: "We recognise that democratic elections are a path to real change."

Violence   Describes conditions under which violence is used or restrained. Reveals how ideological principles guide or limit tactical decisions. For example: "We do not target civilians, our struggle is against military and economic structures."

Distribution of Micro-ideological Dimensions from the Supervised Classification

To provide a clearer understanding of how micro-ideological categories are distributed in the dataset, this Appendix presents a series of bar plots that summarise the frequency of each classification label. These figures help contextualise the results of the supervised classification by showing the baseline distribution of documents and micro-ideological categories in the corpus. The lower counts before the 2000s likely reflect data availability and coverage rather than a real drop in activity. Many datasets in conflict research are sparse or incomplete prior to the digital era, when archiving and access improved.

Total Documents per Year
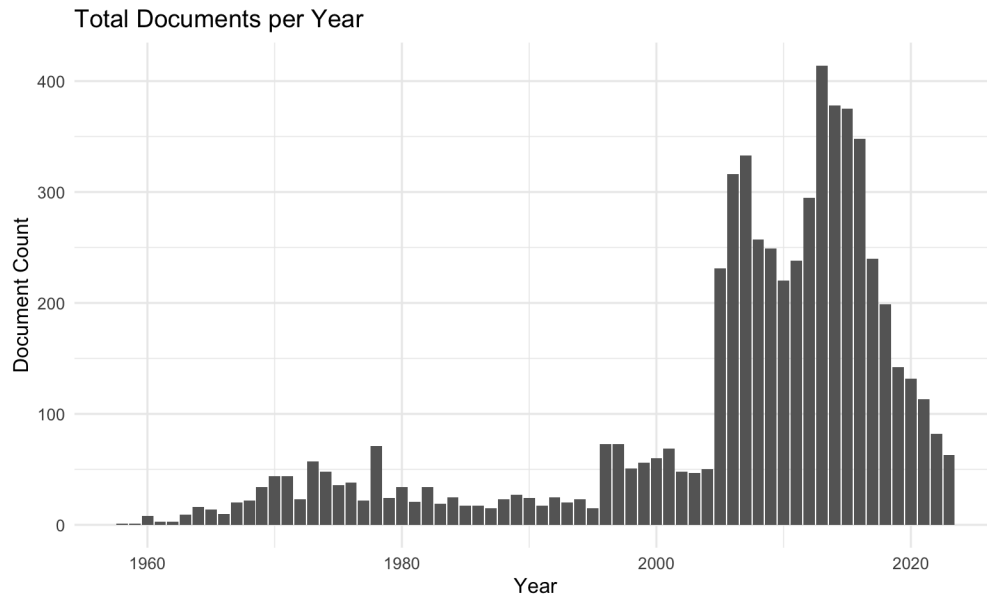
Figure 3.12: Distribution of Document per Year

Number of Unique Organisations per Year
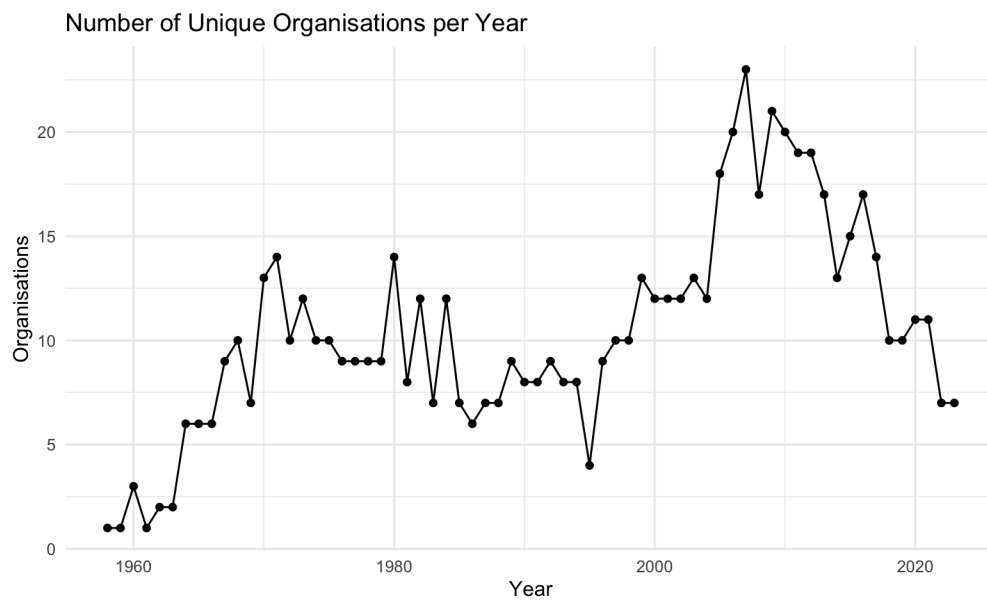
Figure 3.13: Distribution of Unique Organisations per Year
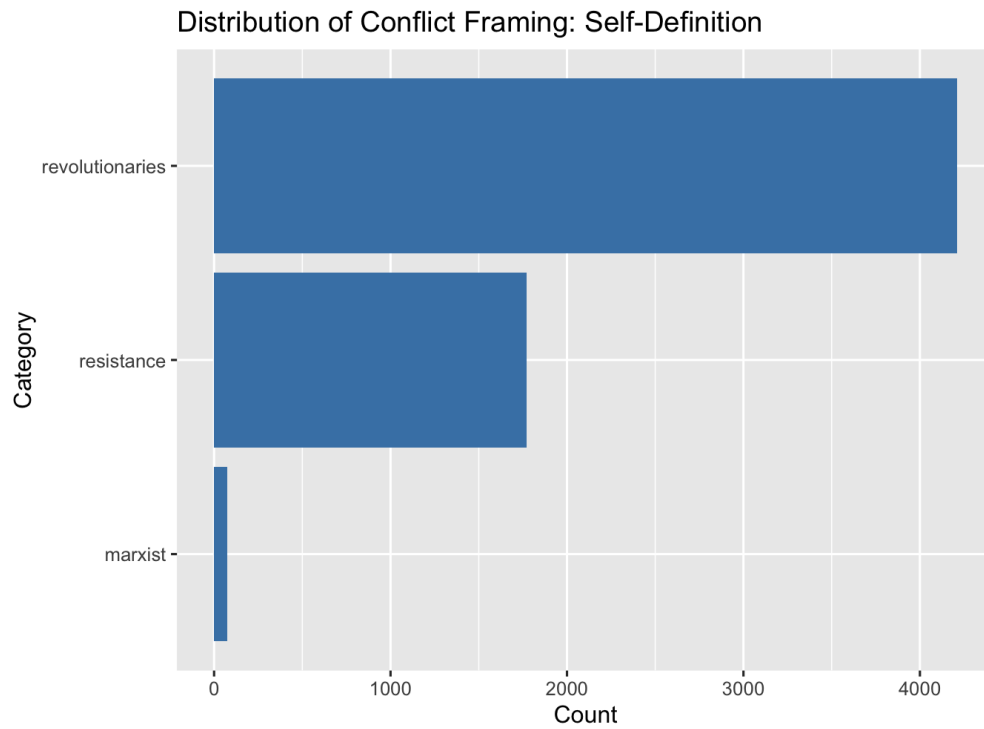
Figure 3.14: Distribution of Conflict Framing: Self-Definition
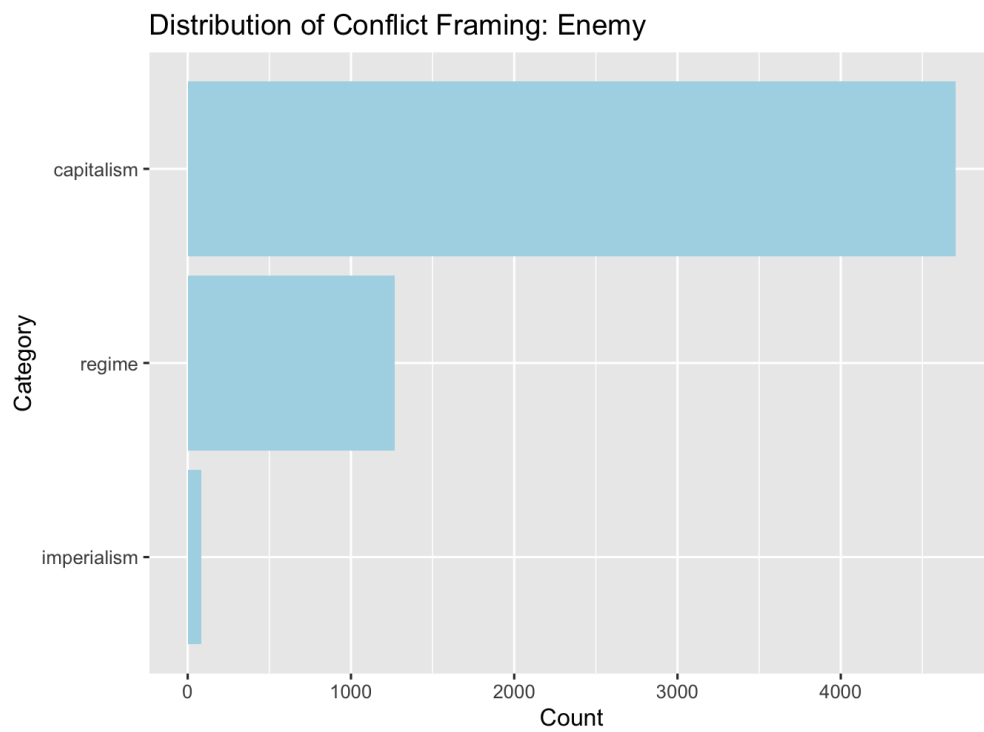
Figure 3.15: Distribution of Conflict Framing: Enemy

Distribution of Conflict Framing: Representation Claims
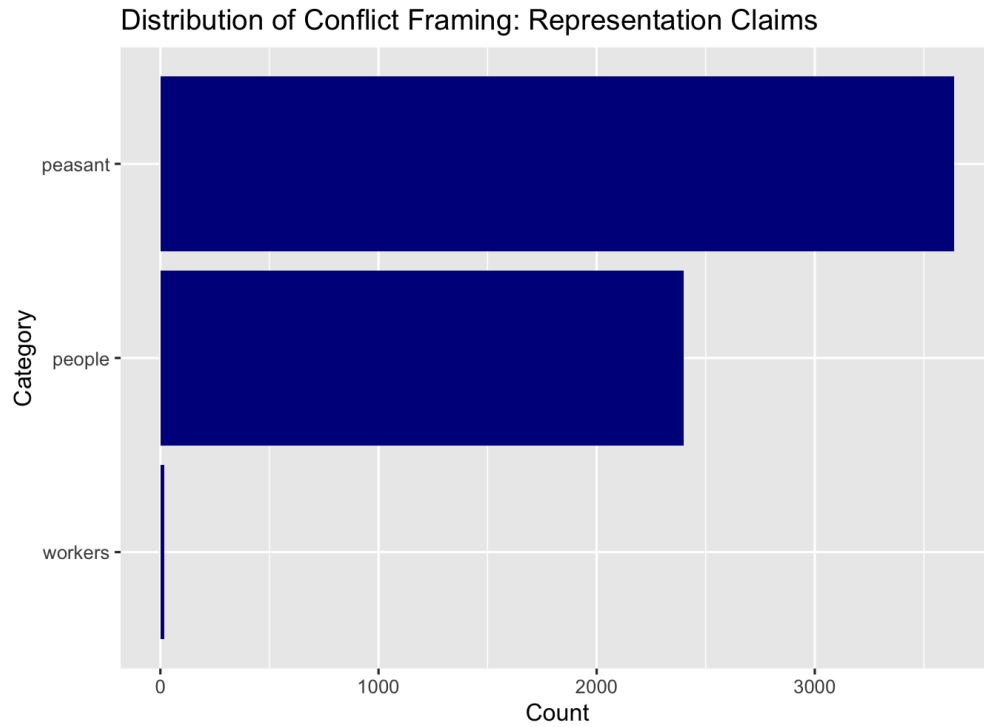
Figure 3.16: Distribution of Conflict Framing: Representation Claims

Distribution of Conflict Goals
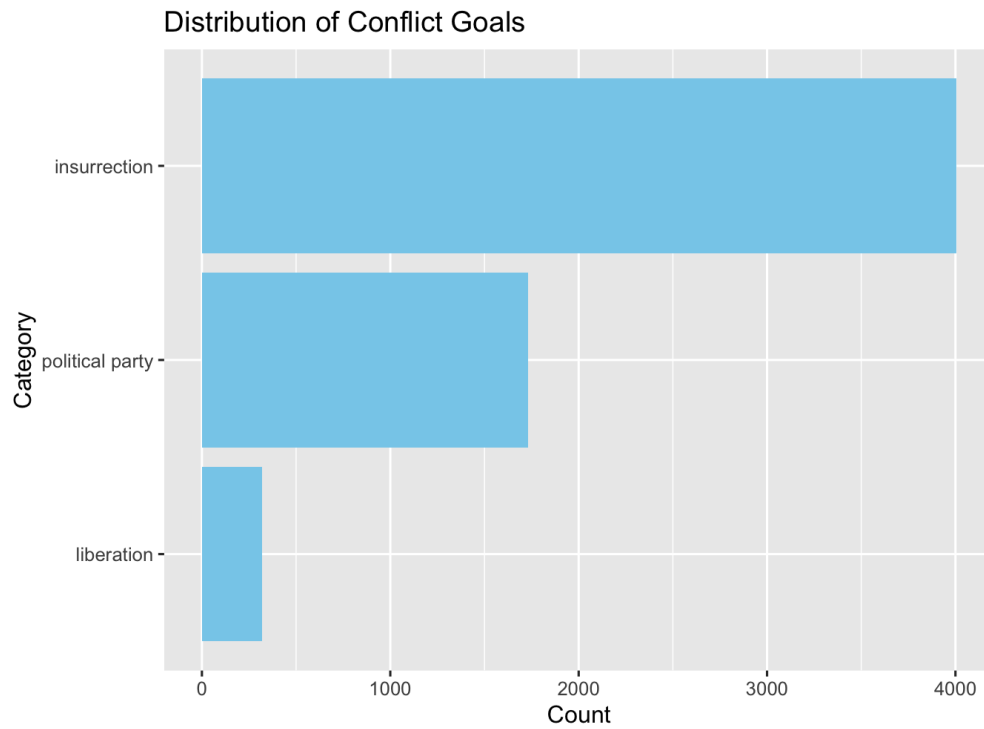
Figure 3.17: Distribution of Conflict Goals
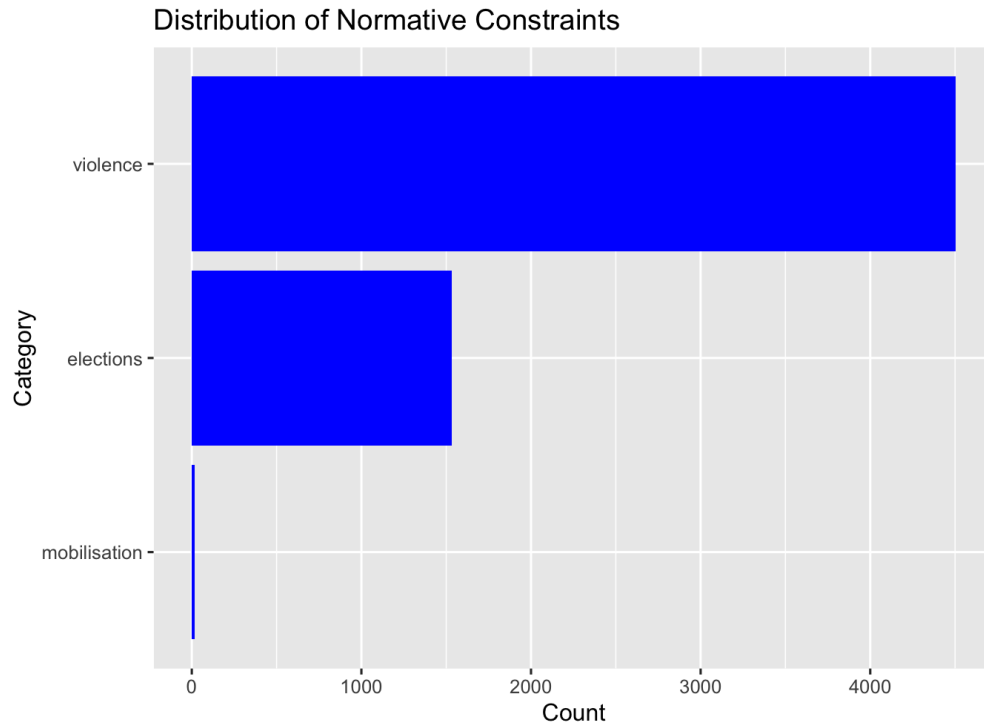
Figure 3.18: Distribution of Normative Constraints

Additionally, to explore the interaction of the categories from the supervised classification, the following heat map (Figure 3.17) visualises co-occurrences between categories across the entire corpus. Each cell represents the frequency with which two categories appear in the same document. Darker colours denote lower frequency, while lighter and more saturated tones correspond to higher co-occurrence. The heat map is symmetric, and diagonal elements that indicate self-co-occurrence are omitted for clarity.
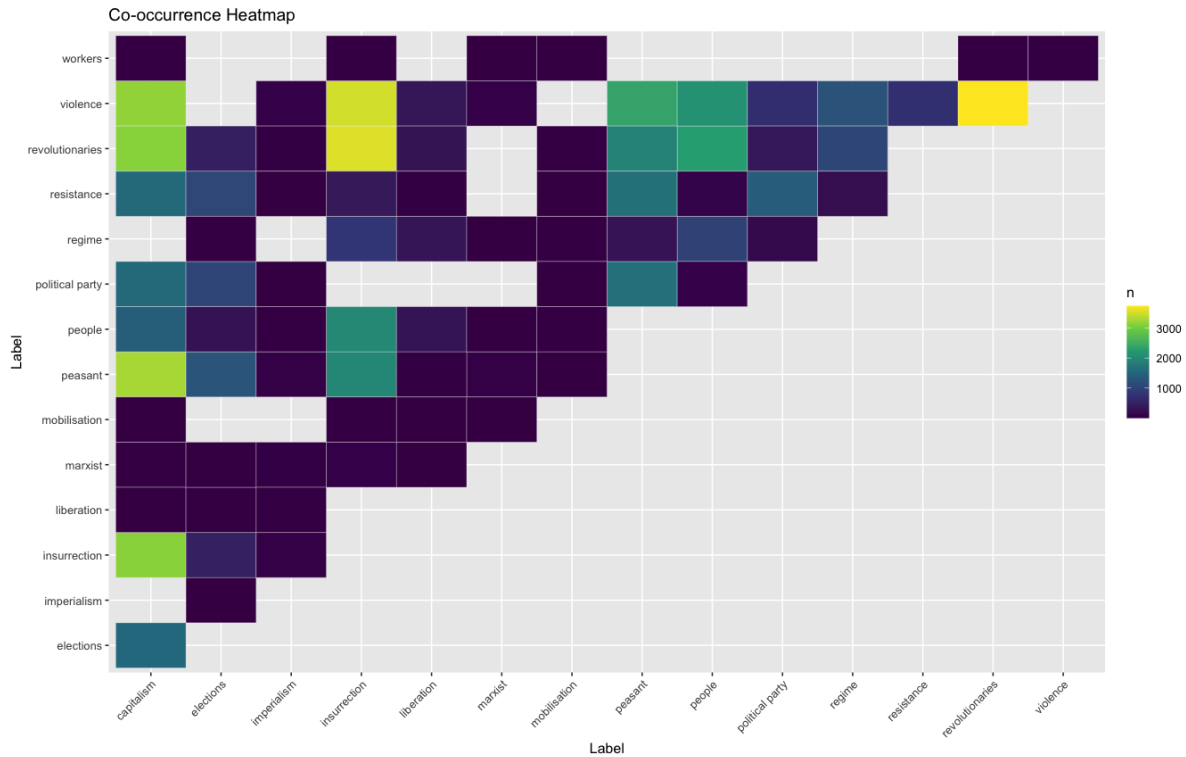
Figure 3.19: Co-occurrence Heatmap of Ideological Labels

The heat map reveals several clusters of strongly interrelated categories. For example, insurrection, violence, and revolutionaries frequently co-occur, suggesting a shared rhetorical structure among texts focused on armed uprising. Similarly, the terms peasant, people, and resistance show strong associations, indicating that representation claims often align with oppositional framing. In contrast, categories such as mobilisation, Marxist, and liberation appear less frequently and are more isolated in their co-occurrence patterns.

Summary of Classification Performance

Across the five supervised classification tasks, model performance varied depending on the ideological category being predicted. The most successful models were those classifying normative constraints and conflict goals, which achieved overall accuracies of 67.5% and 65%. These models also demonstrated strong per-class performance on the dominant categories of violence and insurrection, respectively. Models predicting self-definition, enemy framing, and

representation claims had more moderate performance. Accuracy for these tasks ranged from 23.8% to 53.8%. These results were primarily driven by two structural issues: class imbalance and high semantic overlap between labels.

Despite these challenges, the supervised classification framework effectively shows which micro-ideological dimensions are more reliably predicted from text. Normative constraints and conflict goals exhibit clearer lexical patterns, making them more suitable for automated classification. In contrast, categories such as self-identification and representation claims are often articulated through overlapping language, making them difficult to separate using conventional machine learning methods.

Taken together, the classification results support the findings from the unsupervised clustering analysis. Dimensions such as enemy and representation claims were highly influential in shaping ideological clusters, even though they were harder to predict. This emphasises the value of combining supervised and unsupervised approaches. While classification can identify robust surface-level patterns, clustering reveals underlying structures that may not be easily captured through prediction alone. These findings further validate the micro-ideological framework as a multidimensional tool for analysing rebel group ideology.

Chapter 4

Peace Ownership and Rhetorical Transformation in Rebel Groups

Abstract

Do peace agreement negotiations influence the rhetorical strategies of non-participating rebel groups? While existing literature explores the rhetoric of negotiating factions, little is known about how excluded groups respond discursively to peace processes. Using Wordfish ideal point estimation, this paper analyses documents from 20 Latin American rebel groups (1980–2023) to identify rhetorical changes. The findings show that peace negotiations modify the rhetoric of both participant and non-participant groups. Moreover, groups with political wings are more likely to adopt moderate rhetoric during negotiation periods. These findings contribute to theories of peace ownership, demonstrating that peace processes form part of a broader conflict system with effects beyond the negotiation table.

4.1   Introduction

Do peace agreement negotiations influence the rhetorical strategies of non-participating rebel groups? While much of the existing literature examines how participating groups adjust their rhetoric to align with peace processes (Bell, 2006; Dyrstad et al., 2022; Westendorf, 2018), less attention has been paid to how non-participating groups respond discursively to these negotiations. In this research, I address this gap by analysing how peace negotiations shape the rhetorical position of rebel groups outside the negotiation process, as they compete for the ownership and salience of peace by either aligning with or contesting dominant narratives.

In recent decades, peace negotiations have become a main instrument for resolving armed conflicts to achieve sustainable peace (Ahmed, 2018; Badran, 2014). As the prospect of a peace becomes more realistic, emerging as a salient issue during these processes, rebel groups compete for narratives (Gutiérrez, 2020; Tellez, 2019). This is relevant in a conflict environment where the rhetoric around peace can sway international and public support, creating an incentive to claim issue ownership (Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl, 2022; Keels and Wiegand, 2020; Lee, 2012; Wildman et al., 2021). The political opportunities and constraints generated by the peace process can alter the calculations of both participating and non-participating actors (Fontana et al., 2021; Kovacs, 2017; Phelan, 2018).

To answer this question, I examine the rhetorical positioning in documents from 20 Latin American rebel groups[1] from 1980 to 2023, using textual analysis with the Wordfish[2] ideal point estimation model (Grimmer et al., 2022; Wilkerson and Casas, 2017).

To analyse rhetorical change over the course of peace negotiations, I track the rhetorical positions of both participant and non-participant groups across three phases: pre-negotiation, during negotiation, and post-negotiation. Given that the same groups are observed over time, I use paired t-tests to assess whether the mean rhetorical position changes significantly

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[1]Information about the groups and inclusion criteria can be found in the Appendix.

[2]The model was run on the High-Performance Computer Ceres, a computational cluster comprising 2,192 processors, including multi-threading, 43.5TB of total RAM, 24 GPUs, and 1,080TB of dedicated storage.

between phases, specifically testing for moderation or radicalisation from pre- to during-negotiation, and from during- to post-negotiation. To assess broader variation across all three phases, I employ a one-way ANOVA while controlling for country and participation status, followed by Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (HSD) test to determine which phase-to-phase differences are statistically significant. Finally, I use regression analysis to compare rhetorical positioning between participant and non-participant groups and to identify the other factors influencing rhetorical transformation.

The research focuses on Latin American rebel groups from 1980 to 2023. This region offers several cases where peace agreements have been attempted, and rhetorical transformations have shaped the political system. Notable examples, such as the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (D and Thomson, 2020; Lee, 2019; Villamizar, 2020), illustrate how rebel groups have redefined their strategies in response to peace initiatives.

The findings show that non-participants often adjust their rhetoric more sharply than participants. Non-participant groups tend to radicalise their rhetoric, particularly when they are excluded from post-negotiation political arrangements, while participant groups show more stable and moderate changes, in line with expectations from the literature. The ANOVA and post-hoc tests confirm that rhetorical positions vary significantly by negotiation phase, participation status, and country context, with the most pronounced changes occurring between pre- and post-negotiation periods. The regression analysis further reveals that rhetorical radicalisation among non-participants is strongly associated with ideological indoctrination, propaganda, and splinter status, whereas political institutionalisation and external support are more predictive of moderation among participants. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of how peace negotiations influence the rhetorical position of participant and non-participant groups when peace is a salience issue.

These findings extend the understanding of the impact of peace negotiations on conflict resolution by analysing how they affect the rhetorical dimension of both negotiating and

non-negotiating rebel groups. This study offers a novel application of issue salience and ownership in conflict studies. Also, it has implications for policymakers as the findings suggest that peace negotiations can serve as a a point of moderation for both participants and non-participating groups.

4.2 Peace Salience, Issue Ownership and Rhetorical Transformation

Since the end of the Cold War (1991), intrastate peace agreements have occurred five times more frequently than during it (Badran, 2014; Kreutz, 2010; Wallensteen and Svensson, 2014). The act of signing peace can be considered a signal of rhetorical moderation, driven by the opportunity to participate in electoral politics (Ishiyama, 2019; Ishiyama and Batta, 2011).

Conflict resolution is defined as a situation where "the conflicting parties enter into an agreement that addresses their principal disagreements, recognise each other's ongoing existence as entities, and halt all violent actions against one another" (Wallensteen and Svensson, 2014, 8). A peace agreement is characterised as "an accord aimed at resolving these disagreements, endorsed and publicly accepted by all or the primary actors involved in a conflict. It aims to tackle all or the essential issues at stake" (Kreutz, 2010, 245). Peace agreements represent a central aspect of conflict resolution, being the most significant and desirable method of concluding conflicts (Badran, 2014). Typically, these agreements are formal understandings where parties mutually acknowledge their continued presence. This recognition differentiates a true agreement from capitulation or withdrawal, where one side might cease its campaign, dissolve its organisation, or vacate the contested area. Peace negotiations are more complex than withdrawals. In these accords, none of the parties can claim total victory, nor does any party suffer complete defeat; these accords frequently result in what Badran (2014) calls a cold peace.

It is commonly assumed that peace and democracy mutually reinforce each other, con-

stituting a positive-sum game. In well-established democracies, these elements naturally coalesce, leading to predominantly non-violent conflict resolutions. However, in less stable democracies, the relationship between peace and democracy becomes ambiguous, potentially resulting in zero-sum or even negative-sum scenarios (Bell, 2006). Initiatives aimed at fostering democracy, such as integrating former rebels into political processes, may paradoxically trigger violence, as rival groups and factions can perceive the inclusion of former rebels as a threat to their own power and legitimacy, leading to backlash or renewed conflict (Keels and Wiegand, 2020). Similarly, peace-building measures, such as incorporating rebels into government roles without an electoral mandate could impede progress towards democratisation (Marsteintredet, 2020). Thus, understanding the impact of peace agreement negotiations within the broader conflict ecosystem emerges as a fundamentally empirical question.

In multi-actor civil wars, analyses of peace negotiations' effects on rhetorical positions has focused on the moderation and radicalisation of the dyadic relationship between governments and participant groups (Gibson, 2018; Hodges, 2013). However, a gap remains in understanding the effects of negotiations on the whole conflict ecosystem, including non-participant groups.

Regarding non-participant groups, research has focused on the spoiler problem (Stedman, 1997; Zahar, 2012). In contrast to times without peace negotiations, when all parties remain in open confrontation, peace processes face the risk of spoilers as excluded groups are more likely to radicalise under such conditions. Stedman (1997) presents spoilers as parties and actors who view peace negotiations as a threat and try to sabotage peace. As not every party in the conflict may perceive or receive the benefits of the agreement, some actors are incentivised to undermine peace attempts through rhetorical and behavioural changes (Zahar, 2012). This occurs because these actors fear marginalisation, loss of power, or exclusion from post-conflict political and economic arrangements, which they perceive as detrimental to their interests.

In the literature on rhetorical transformation, the focus has been on understanding radi-

calisation and moderation. Authors such as Abrahms et al. (2018), Altier et al. (2014), and Fortna (2015) have examined radicalisation at the individual level. Research on moderation has focused on explaining how and why armed groups enter into peace processes and pursue political participation (Berti, 2019; 2023; Sindre, 2019).

The rhetorical transformation of rebel groups can be understood as a dimension of ideological manifestation that does not necessarily include behavioural changes (Albert, 2023; Githens-Mazer, 2012; Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2010). Even when a change in rhetoric is instrumental or strategic rather than a change in ideology, it reflects how groups respond to their environment and adjust their communication to maintain legitimacy and relevance (Geiß, 2022; Willems, 2022).

Peace Salience and Issue Ownership

Peace negotiations generate rhetorical transformation in participant groups. As peace becomes a salient issue, the actors at the negotiating table can claim issue ownership (de Blok, 2024; Franko and Witko, 2023; Greene and Jensen, 2018). I argue that peace, as a salient issue, and the competition over its ownership, can also generate a rhetorical transformation in non-participant rebel groups.

Issue ownership refers to the way in which participant factions, the government and a rebel group, claim authority over peace as a central issue in the political agenda (Aruguete et al., 2023; Neundorf and Adams, 2018; Willems, 2022). Authors such as Brader et al. (2020) and Böhmelt and Ezrow (2024) claim that ownership generates benefits such as legitimacy, international support, and agenda-setting. Additionally, participant groups and the government can be associated with stability and the desire for conflict resolution, increasing civilian support (Badran, 2014).

While participant groups and the government, in a dyadic logic, assume ownership of peace as a central issue when the negotiations begin and are public, non-participants face increased pressure generated by the salience and popular appeal of peace, particularly among

constituencies they seek to influence and represent, which leads them to consider transforming their rhetoric to adopt more peace-aligned narratives (de Blok, 2024; Franko and Witko, 2023; Greene and Jensen, 2018). However, this pressure is context-dependent, as peace is not always perceived as desirable, especially when it involves perceived losses, such as territorial concessions and political marginalisation.

For non-participant groups, peace agreement negotiations are a highly salient issue due to both public demand for conflict resolution (María Idaly Barreto-Galeano and Éric Maurice Lair, 2021) and external pressures such as international mediation and donor conditionality (Kyselova, 2024). These negotiations can alter the incentive structure for non-participants by placing peace at the centre of political discourse, thereby increasing the reputational costs of maintaining radical rhetoric (Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Jarstad and Sisk, 2008). In response, non-participant groups adjust their rhetoric to appear more moderate in order to retain and expand their influence, avoid marginalisation, and position themselves as relevant actors in both negotiation and post-negotiation political landscapes (Paffenholz and Zartman, 2019).

However, not all non-participant groups engage in rhetorical moderation. Some can resist this change due to deep-rooted ideological commitments that frame compromise as betrayal or because their support base rewards ideological purity over political pragmatism (Jarstad and Sisk, 2008; Tokdemir et al., 2021). For these groups, maintaining radical rhetoric functions as a differentiation strategy that preserves their distinct identity and reinforces loyalty among core constituents.

Issue ownership and salience show the dilemmas that peace processes create for non-participant groups (Jarstad and Sisk, 2008). When peace becomes a salient issue due to public demand, media attention and international engagement, participant actors tend to claim ownership of the peace agenda, positioning themselves as legitimate representatives of stability and resolution. This dynamic can marginalise non-participant groups, who may be excluded from the material and symbolic benefits of the negotiation process.

In this context, non-participant groups face what can be called a horizontal dilemma: they must decide whether to maintain a hardline rhetorical stance to differentiate themselves and appeal to core supporters or to moderate their rhetoric and engage more directly in the discursive competition around peace (Jarstad and Sisk, 2008). Importantly, these strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive; some groups can maintain radical messaging on certain issues while simultaneously adopting more conciliatory tones in others, strategically navigating between opposition and engagement.

A systemic dilemma also arises: non-participant groups must balance local constituencies that may be sceptical of negotiations with international actors who increasingly expect rhetorical alignment with peace norms (Jarstad and Sisk, 2008). Navigating these tensions requires careful messaging calibration to avoid both domestic alienation and international delegitimisation.

Rhetorical transformation occurs when participant and non-participant groups change their discourse to align with the dominant peace narrative. This rhetorical change reflects the influence of peace negotiations beyond the negotiating parties, as groups vie for legitimacy and control over the peace narrative. As has been analysed in the cases of the Turkish-Kurdish peace processes and the negotiations in Colombia with FARC in 2016, rival groups outside the negotiations enter the discursive competition (Dinc and Ozduzen, 2023; María Idaly Barreto-Galeano and Éric Maurice Lair, 2021).

In periods of negotiations Stedman (1997) presents spoilers as parties and actors who view peace negotiations as a threat and try to sabotage the process. As participants and non-participants may perceive and receive different benefits from the agreement, excluded groups have more incentives to attack the process (Zahar, 2012). This supports the argument that both participants and non-participants are forced to re-evaluate their rhetorical strategies to cope with the dominant peace narrative.

The link between spoilers and issue ownership lies in how non-participant groups respond to the political centrality of peace. While peace negotiations tend to increase the salience

of peace as a dominant political issue, not all non-participants react the same way. Some groups act as spoilers, perceiving the process as a threat to their interests and legitimacy (Stedman, 1997). Others, however, view the negotiations as an opportunity to reposition themselves within a changing conflict environment.

Peace salience alone does not determine spoiler behaviour; rather, it reshapes the environment in which groups operate. I argue that, on aggregate, the increased visibility and public demand for peace during negotiations can incentivise rhetorical moderation among non-participant groups seeking future relevance and participation. While some groups may never engage in the process, the ripple effects of a peace negotiation, such as a change in rhetoric, international attention, and the redefinition of legitimate political actors can pressure even excluded groups to recalibrate their rhetoric. In this way, peace salience contributes to a general trend toward moderation, even as the spoiler phenomenon persists in specific contexts.

Peace negotiations involve at least two parties and can thus be conceptualised as dyadic. Rebel groups calibrate their rhetorical strategies not only in relation to each other but also in response to the state's narrative. In the Colombian context, for example, the rhetorical "ideal point" of the government varied significantly between administrations: under President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), the government emphasised security, demobilisation, and a hardline anti-terrorist discourse (Mouly and Hernández Delgado, 2022), whereas under President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), the government adopted a more conciliatory tone, framing peace as achievable through dialogue and political reintegration (Phelan, 2018). The position of the government can also influence how rebel groups frame their own positions, with some adopting conciliatory rhetoric to align with Santos' discourse, such as the FARC, while others maintain oppositional language to distance themselves from state legitimacy, as seen in the case of the ELN (María Idaly Barreto-Galeano and Éric Maurice Lair, 2021). Accounting for the government's rhetorical stance allows for a more dynamic understanding of how rebels respond to changing state incentives and audience expectations.

Direction of change: Radicalisation and Moderation

Peace negotiations can be analysed as learning experiences for rebel groups. In that sense, the perception of the fairness of previous processes affects rhetorical outcomes. Druckman and Wagner (2019) found that peace agreements that included justice, transparency, and inclusion were perceived as more legitimate and had long-term effects on peace stability. This is supported by Bakiner (2016)'s analysis of Colombian and Turkish peace agreements, which resulted in a moderation of rhetoric in Colombia and a radicalisation in the case of the peace process with the PKK in Turkey. As peace is a desirable outcome in conflict scenarios, understanding the effect of peace negotiations beyond the table can improve strategies to include more actors in the processes and generate a systemic response to the end of conflict.

At the group level, radicalisation and moderation can be analysed by establishing a baseline to track rhetorical shifts over time. This approach enhances the reliability of temporal data, offering a more nuanced understanding of these organisations' rhetorical trajectories. While it is commonly observed that rebel groups participating in peace agreements tend to moderate their rhetoric and excluded groups tend to be spoilers and radicalise, this research investigates the direction of the rhetorical change.

The discourse on radicalisation, framed within security concerns, has been employed to legitimise policy agendas targeting specific groups, notably Islamic communities after the 9/11 attacks, and earlier, Marxist rebel groups during the Cold War (Breen-Smyth, 2014; Gill et al., 2016). In Latin America, the securitisation of radicalisation discourse justified support for anti-communist militias, such as the Contras in Nicaragua and paramilitary groups in Colombia, as well as backing authoritarian regimes in Argentina and Chile (Villamizar, 2017).

Radicalisation as a process has been extensively debated following the 9/11 attacks, associated with an increase in the justification of violence as a political tool (Beck, 2015; Holt et al., 2015; Leader-Maynard, 2022; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). However, some authors claim that there is bias in analysing radicalisation associated with Islamist groups while ignoring similar rhetorical intensification in other ideological families (Bamber and Svensson,

2022; Kundnani, 2012; Ranstorp, 2010; Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler, 2016). Additionally, radicalisation occurs when a group intensifies its rhetoric to differentiate itself from groups participating in peace negotiations. Authors such as Amaral (2021), Kyselova (2024), and Dinc and Ozduzen (2023) argue that this outcome is more likely in a process that excludes actors, generating resentment and framing the negotiations as elitist and exclusionary.

Process-based approaches conceptualise radicalisation as a pathway and a dynamic phenomenon. Taylor and Horgan (2006) describe radicalisation as "a sequence of events, involving steps or operations that are typically ordered, or interdependent, or both." (586) This cumulative process is influenced by factors such as ideology, socialisation, and critical junctures. Ideology, bridges the structural causes (macro-level) with individual motivations for radicalisation (micro-level) (Beck, 2015; Leader-Maynard, 2022; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008). This perspective views the causes of radicalisation as facilitators or accelerators rather than direct triggers, suggesting that certain causes render radicalisation feasible and more appealing. A significant strength of this approach is its capacity to analyse the causes of radicalisation at the group level. Under this frame, peace negotiations may influence radicalisation at the group level.

Conversely, moderation has been linked to factors such as organisational constraints (Curtis and Sindre, 2019), political opportunities, and incentives (Abele, 1989; Besch and López-Ortega, 2021; Tezcür, 2009; Wickham, 2004). For authors who study transitions from armed groups to political parties, rebel groups moderate their rhetoric as a precondition for democratic participation and peace (Ishiyama, 2019; Ishiyama and Batta, 2011; Manning and Smith, 2016; Sindre, 2019). This moderation is driven by the necessity to appeal to broader audiences. This process has also been analysed in Islamist movements that enter electoral politics (Bamber and Svensson, 2022; Revkin and Wood, 2021; Schwedler, 2007). Electoral studies highlight a notable gap in the literature regarding centrist or moderate preferences at the individual level (Golosov, 2016; Laver et al., 2003; Phelan, 2018).

The transition from radicalism to moderation can often be attributed to strategic interests.

In such cases, moderation manifests as a behavioural change driven by a strategic evaluation of the costs and benefits associated with an ideological shift (Tezcür, 2009). For instance, secessionist groups have chosen to engage in democratic processes as a strategic move (Curtis and Sindre, 2019; Ishiyama, 2019; Ishiyama and Batta, 2011; Manning and Smith, 2016; Sindre and Söderström, 2016; Sindre, 2019). Similarly, armed groups have transformed into political entities (Abele, 1989; Besch and López-Ortega, 2021; Wickham, 2004), and Islamic movements have opted to participate in democratic elections (Bamber and Svensson, 2022; Revkin and Wood, 2021; Russo, 2017; Schwedler, 2007).

The shift towards democratic transitions presents incentives for radical movements to adopt moderation, as argued by Wickham (2004). This move towards moderation is often seen as essential for integration into the political system. In the realm of socialist movements, such moderation has been linked to the prospects of future electoral success (Sindre, 2018; 2019). Furthermore, engagement with stable democratic institutions has been identified as a catalyst for moderation (English, 2019; Whiting, 2018). However, this inclusion can affect the internal political dynamics of Islamist groups differently, potentially leading to adverse effects (Schwedler, 2007). For revolutionary guerrillas and similar entities, political participation and inclusion represent crucial factors in ideological shifts (Sindre and Söderström, 2016; Sindre, 2018; 2019).

Accountability can act as a catalyst for moderation within radical movements, as Wayne et al. (2016) argue, helping to sustain constituencies, secure community support, and bolster legitimacy. However, Jeffrey et al. (2015) and Schlichte (2012) caution that legitimacy can take various forms, and the pursuit of democratic legitimacy might compromise internal unity, precipitating tensions within the organisation. Such internal conflicts are not uncommon among armed groups and have been recognised as a contributing factor to the splintering of rebel factions (Staniland, 2021).

Rhetorical moderation offers advantages in peace agreements and post-conflict scenarios because it fosters stability and reduces the likelihood of spoilers (Kaplan et al., 2018; Meger

and Sachseder, 2020; Nilsson et al., 2020). However, Ishiyama (2016) claims that "high rates of party formation by former armed groups do not necessarily bode well for the development of democratically robust regimes" (971). This is more prominent in dyadic peace agreements that exclude multiple groups in multi-party civil wars and impacts rebel groups' rhetorical transformation.

In this sense, rhetorical transformations are not only present in groups that participate in peace negotiations. By analysing the peace processes in Guatemala and El Salvador, Eschmann and Nilsson (2023) found that civil society involvement, when peace was a salient issue, contributed to a stronger peace agreement in Guatemala compared with weaker involvement and a less inclusive agreement in El Salvador. Similarly, Paffenholz (2014) argues that the inclusion of civil society pressures other actors to adjust their rhetoric and moderate their claims. Also, in the case of the Myanmar peace process, ethnic groups that were included were more moderate, while youth movements were excluded, leading to increased radicalisation (Grizelj, 2019). On the other hand, exclusion can foster rhetorical radicalisation, as shown in the case of the political opposition during the peace referendum in Colombia in 2016 (Amaral, 2021) and in the Donbas peace process, with the exclusion of pro-Russian civil actors (Kyselova, 2024).

In sum, the direction of rhetorical transformation, towards radicalisation or moderation, is shaped by factors such as the perceived legitimacy of peace processes, and inclusion or exclusion from negotiations. While moderation often reflects a pragmatic shift aligned with opportunities for political participation and legitimacy, radicalisation emerges as a response to exclusion, perceived injustice, or the need to maintain ideological purity. Understanding these dynamics is essential to grasp how peace processes influence the broader ecosystem of armed actors, beyond the negotiating table, and why some groups adapt while others entrench.

Peace Negotiations as Learning Processes

Peace negotiations act as opportunities for learning, not only from past attempts but also in real-time. Rebel groups observe both successful and failed peace processes and adjust their rhetorical strategies accordingly. During ongoing negotiations, when outcomes remain uncertain, non-participant groups may moderate their rhetoric in anticipation of potential inclusion, legitimacy, and future political gains, drawing on lessons from previous cases where participant groups benefited from engagement (Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl, 2022; Keels and Wiegand, 2020). This moderation can be part of a signalling strategy aimed at domestic and international audiences. However, if the negotiation process begins to stall or collapse, some groups can reverse course, either retaining confrontational rhetoric or radicalising further in opposition to the peace framework. Thus, rhetorical change is not solely a post-negotiation phenomenon but unfolds dynamically throughout the peace process.

The institutional changes and political reforms that governments promote to accompany peace negotiations create incentives for rhetorical moderation. As peace gained salience among the civilian population, demands to cease conflict increased (Wildman et al., 2021). In this regard, the possibility of political inclusion as an outcome of peace agreements serves as an incentive for moderation (Céspedes-Báez and Ruiz, 2018; Ishiyama, 2019).

Additionally, international support and third-party involvement in peace negotiations contribute to stronger agreements and higher implementation rates (Jeffrey et al., 2015; Schlichte, 2012; Wayne et al., 2016). Rebel groups that have international allies and support are more constrained in their demands. In that sense, if groups perceive an external claim supporting peace, non-participant groups may moderate their rhetoric to maintain the external sponsor.

The negotiation and conclusion of political pacts often entail certain concessions and risks. Rebel groups might worry about the erosion of their legitimacy gained during the conflict, whereas governments can face criticism for engaging with entities labelled as terrorists (Keethaponcalan, 2024; Sindre, 2019). These negotiations can incur electoral repercussions

and provoke internal factionalism, with hardliners potentially accusing negotiators of betrayal and positioning themselves as alternative leaders (Hafez, 2020). Nonetheless, peace negotiations can create an incentive to abandon hardline positions and lead to moderation (Tokdemir et al., 2021). With fewer active actors after an agreement, remaining groups reassess their rhetorical positions and learn from the negotiations to make future claims for peace.

The internal structure of rebel groups can influence their rhetorical positions (Paffenholz, 2014; Yegen, 2016; Zartman, 1989). The presence of a political wing can act as a moderating force, as it is a structure in the line between legality and illegality, this applies to participants and non-participant groups (Besch and López-Ortega, 2021; Ishiyama, 2016; Sindre and Söderström, 2016; Sindre, 2018; 2019). Political wings can be used to attract broader constituencies and gain international support and legitimacy.

Cases such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) show that having a political wing can influence the decision to participate in peace negotiations (Yegen, 2016). However, peace negotiations can produce fractures in both participant and non-participant groups, leading to splinter factions and divergent rhetorical positions. In the Sri Lankan peace process, the split between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Karuna faction led to radicalisation in the former and moderation in the latter (Keethaponcalan, 2024).

Additionally, some studies suggest that the presence of female combatants and women's participation in negotiations foster rhetorical moderation and participation in peace negotiations (Brannon et al., 2024; Gómez and Montealegre, 2021). Jana Krause and Bränfors (2018) found that agreements with female signatories were more comprehensive in their provisions and achieved higher implementation rates. Furthermore, Brannon et al. (2024) argues that African rebel groups with female soldiers were more likely to enter negotiations, as women in those groups advocated for conciliation and rhetorical transformation towards peace.

Regarding the economic incentives for transforming rhetoric, Michael Jonsson and O'Hara (2016) argues that amnesties and reintegration incentivised drug-trafficking rebel groups

to align their discourse with the salience of peace. Additionally, international support for peace negotiations can reduce civilian targeting, as it pushes excluded groups to adopt a peace-oriented rhetoric to maintain their legitimacy (Sener, 2025). However, if international support comes from a radical actor, the rhetorical position can shift towards radicalisation as a rejection of the peace process (Jeffrey et al., 2015; Schlichte, 2012; Wayne et al., 2016).

At the same time, not all non-participant groups are equally susceptible to rhetorical moderation. Certain organisational characteristics can reduce a group's likelihood of adjusting its rhetoric. Rebel groups with strong political indoctrination structures and strong propaganda mechanisms may be resistant to moderation (Green, 2016; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014), as their ideological commitments and recruitment strategies rely on maintaining a hardline stance (Gates, 2002). In that case, I argue that these groups would change their rhetoric towards radicalisation.

Similarly, non-participant splinter factions, groups that have broken away from a larger rebel movement, can be especially resistant to moderation. These groups often emerge due to dissatisfaction with leadership, disagreements over strategy, or opposition to peace talks, making them more ideologically rigid and prone to rhetorical radicalisation (Ives, 2021; Shesterinina and Livesey, 2024). The expectation with these types of groups is that they would move towards rhetorical radicalisation.

Rebel rhetoric is not merely a reflection of fixed ideological commitments, but a strategic expression that can change in response to political opportunity and intergroup dynamics. As de Mesquita and Shadmehr (2023) argue, group motivations can change in response to the repression exercised by the state; in this case, the government is an actor that influences the rhetorical transformation. Additionally, organisational characteristics can also shape rhetorical behaviour. Weinstein (2006) suggests that groups with ideologically committed leadership are more likely to develop coherent, stable narratives, while opportunistic groups may display greater rhetorical flexibility and inconsistency. These factors help explain the observed variation in how participant and non-participant rebel groups adjust their rhetoric during peace

negotiations, with some groups moving towards moderation, while others intensify radical messages to maintain their distinctiveness.

A Model of Rhetorical Transformation

I propose a model that captures the rhetorical changes of non-participant rebel groups in response to peace negotiations. The model incorporates the context of the conflict and peace negotiations, the position of non-combatants, including leadership and constraints, the strategic considerations, and the potential future options for non-participants, including moderation, neutrality, or radicalisation.

I consider a conflict setting with multiple armed groups, including at least one government and at least one recognised rebel negotiating faction as participants, and one or more non-participant rebel groups. The negotiations introduce a new equilibrium where peace gains salience, affecting the incentives of non-participants. The government and participant groups have issue ownership over peace, while non-participants evaluate their best response, considering political and organisational constraints.

For this model, I consider the following assumptions. First, that peace negotiations create issue salience, increasing public support for moderation from the moment the negotiations begin. Additionally, I suggest that political institutions within rebel groups and international support influence non-participant choices.

Given the new conflict environment that peace negotiations create and the salience of peace, non-participant groups face three strategic choices:

1. **Moderation**: Align rhetoric with peace as a way to seek future inclusion.

2. **Neutrality**: Maintain the current rhetorical position.

3. **Radicalisation**: Strengthen confrontational rhetoric and potentially act rhetorically as a spoiler.

I also consider that not all non-participant groups will respond to the issue of peace salience in the same way. As I stated, groups with political institutions have more incentives to moderate and participate in a peace negotiation, as they can integrate into the political process and transition to electoral politics. On the opposite end, splinter groups have more incentives to radicalise to preserve ideological and rhetorical purity.

In that sense, the rhetorical choice of non-participants will depend on salience, the political institutions of the group, external support, and whether the group is a splinter. I propose two hypotheses to test this model:

Hypothesis 1: *Non-participants and participant groups are more likely to moderate their rhetoric when peace becomes a highly salient political issue.*

Hypothesis 2: *Rebel groups with formal political structures are more likely to adjust their rhetoric towards moderation, anticipating future political integration. While splinter groups are more likely to radicalise because of political indoctrination.*

As peace negotiations create competition for issue ownership, non-participant groups may adopt moderate rhetoric to remain relevant, signal their potential role in future political arrangements, and prepare the ground for eventual political participation. However, the extent to which this occurs depends on their political and organisational structures.

4.3   Data and Methodology

To test the hypotheses, I use a dataset of 20 rebel organisations in Latin America from 1980 to 2023, which includes one observation per group per year, covering active years since the first peace negotiation attempt.

The selection of Latin American rebel groups was guided by the high frequency of peace agreements and negotiations in the region, which have influenced the rhetoric of Marxist movements. Countries such as Colombia, Guatemala, and El Salvador have experienced numerous negotiations leading to peace agreements since 1980. Additionally, there is extensive

documentation from rebel groups in repositories such as CEDEMA and institutions created as part of the peace processes. Table 4.1 shows the peace negotiations included, along with the participant and non-participant actors.[3]

Country	Negotiation	Participants	Non-Participants
Colombia	La Uribe Negotiations (1982-1984)	FARC, M-19	ELN, EPL, CRS, JBC
	M-19 Negotiations (1988-1990)	M-19	FARC, ELN, EPL, CRS, JBC
	EPL Negotiations (1990-1991)	EPL	FARC, ELN, CRS, JBC
	Tlaxcala Negotiations (1992)	ELN, CRS, JBC	FARC
	Viana Negotiations (1998)	ELN	FARC
	Caguán Negotiations (1999-2002)	FARC	ELN
	Peace Summit Negotiations (2002)	ELN	FARC
	Peace Negotiation (2005-2008)	ELN	FARC
	Habana Negotiations (2012-2016)	FARC	ELN
	Total Peace (2022-2024)	ELN	SM-FARC, DIS-FARC
Guatemala	Peace Negotiations and Accord (1987-1996)	UNRG	EGP-GT, FAR-GT, ORPA
El Salvador	Peace Negotiations and Accord of Chapultepec (1989-1992)	FMLN	ERP-SL, FPL, PCS, PRTC-S, RN-FARN

Table 4.1: Peace Negotiations in Latin America

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[3]The groups included in the analysis are: Corriente de Renovación Socialista (CRS), Disidencias de las FARC-EP (DIS-FARC), Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo (FARC), Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19), Movimiento Jaime Bateman Cayón (JBC), Partido Comunista de Colombia Marxista-Leninista - Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP-GT), Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR-GT), Organización del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA), Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), Partido Comunista de El Salvador (PCS), Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos (PRTC-S), Resistencia Nacional Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional (RN-FARN), Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP-SL), Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), Fuerzas Populares de Liberación "Farabundo Martí" (FPL).

As a dependent variable, *rhetorical position* is used, which measures, via Wordfish ideal point estimation, the position of a text on an ideological spectrum based on word frequencies. This unsupervised technique was designed for scaling textual data (Grimmer et al., 2022; Linder et al., 2020; Wilkerson and Casas, 2017).

To calculate the dependent variable, the texts were pre-processed to remove stop words, and then Wordfish was applied [4] to assign a rhetorical score to each document based on the frequency and distribution of its words. The scores indicate the relative position of each document on a scale from moderate to radical. After obtaining scores for each document, the scores were aggregated for each group per year to create a yearly *rhetorical position* [5].

The dependent variable captures changes in the rhetorical position over time, showing how the position changed from the previous period, where positive values would be more moderate and negative scores more radical, allowing me to test the hypotheses of peace negotiation effects on non-participant groups. The *rhetorical position* has a mean score of 0.13 with a standard deviation of 0.42. The median score is 0.54, with a range from 0.81 (most moderate group-year) to -2.25 (most radical group-year).

Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 show the rhetorical positions over time for participants and non-participants in Colombia, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The Y-axis represents the mean rhetorical position, with higher values likely indicating more moderate rhetoric and lower values signalling radicalisation. The X-axis represents time. The shaded regions represent negotiation periods, the dashed lines mark critical junctures with a signed peace agreement; and the solid lines represent rhetorical positions, blue for participant groups and red for non-participant groups.

Figure 4.1 presents the evolution of rhetorical positions for participant and non-participant rebel groups in Colombia over multiple peace negotiation periods. The trends show that participant groups (blue line) generally moderate during peace negotiations, with a particularly

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[4]To run that model, I used the High-Performance Computer Ceres. The Ceres cluster is a computational cluster comprising 2,192 processors including multi-threading, 43.5TB total RAM, 24 GPUs, and 1,080TB of dedicated storage.

[5]More information about the pre-processing and the Wordfish model results can be found in the Appendix.

pronounced change during the 2016 FARC Peace Agreement to more radical position. In contrast, non-participant groups (red line) exhibit a more erratic pattern, with periods of rhetorical convergence during negotiations but sharp radicalisation after certain peace processes, such as the failed Caguán negotiations (1999-2002), in which both participants and non-participant groups radicalised.
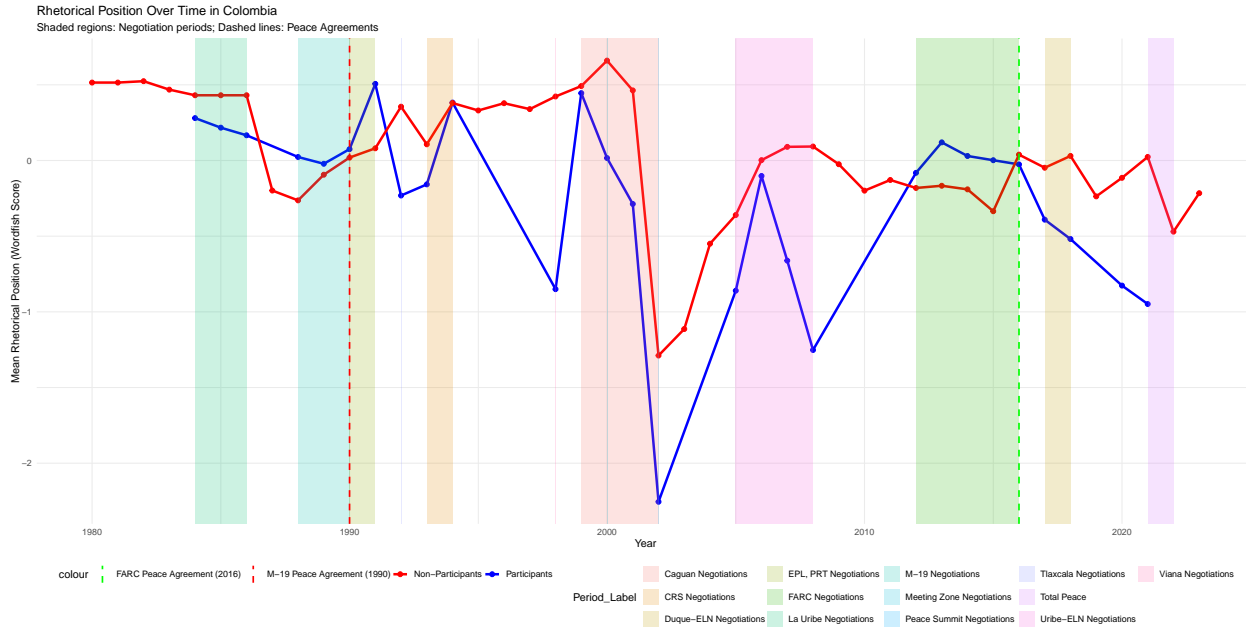
Figure 4.1: Rhetorical Position Over Time for Colombian Groups

Figure 4.2 shows the rhetorical transformation of rebel groups in Guatemala, with a focus on the 1996 peace agreement. Guatemala's non-participant groups (red line) initially followed a similar rhetorical trajectory as participants (blue line), moderating their rhetoric over time. However, a gradual divergence emerges post-agreement, with non-participants increasingly adopting a more moderate position in the years following the peace process.
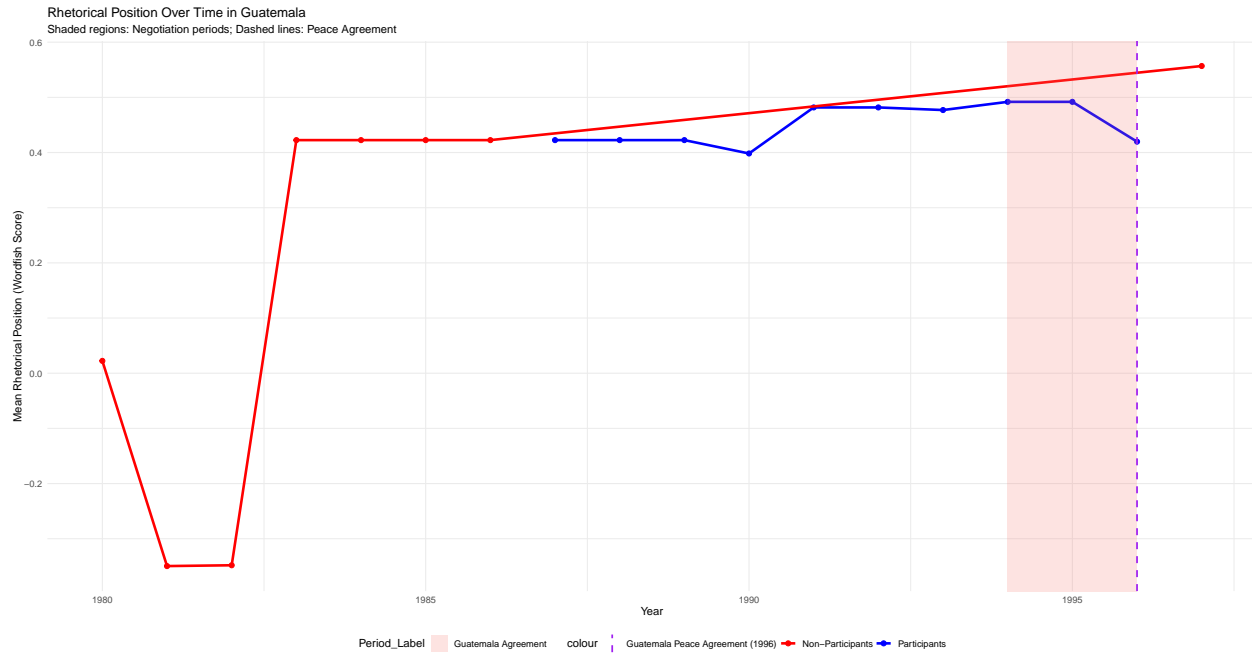
Figure 4.2: Rhetorical Position Over Time for Guatemalan Groups

Figure 4.3 shows rhetorical shifts among participant and non-participant rebel groups in El Salvador, specifically around the Chapultepec Peace Accords (1992). Unlike Colombia, where rhetorical volatility persists, El Salvador exhibits a clear trend of sustained moderation among participants (blue line) during and after the negotiation period. This trend is consistent with non-participants (red line) following the signing of the peace agreement. The Chapultepec Accords effectively facilitated the transition of the FMLN from an armed group to a political party and contributed to the end of the civil war in El Salvador.
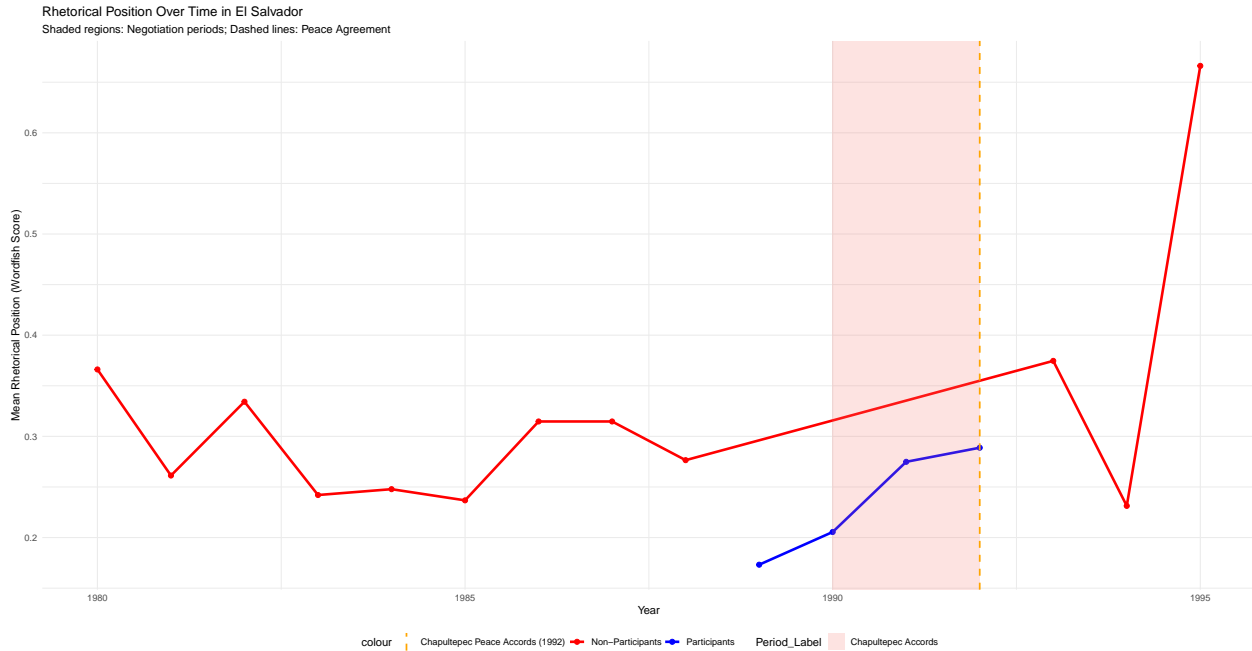
Figure 4.3: Rhetorical Position Over Time for El Salvador Groups

To analyse rhetorical change, I compare the mean rhetorical position of participants and non-participants across the negotiation periods: pre-negotiation, during negotiation, and post-negotiation. Given that the data follows the same groups over time, I employed paired t-tests to assess whether the changes in rhetorical position between periods were statistically significant, particularly from pre- to during-negotiation and from during- to post-negotiation.

I also conducted a one-way ANOVA to examine whether rhetorical transformation varied significantly across all three phases, controlling for country effects and participation status (participants versus non-participants). Following the ANOVA, I used Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (HSD) test to identify which negotiation phases differed significantly from one another.

Additionally, I ran regression models for participant and non-participant groups to test whether their rhetorical positions differed and to identify the factors that might drive rhetorical transformation.

The independent variables included in the model are [6]:

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[6]These variables were created based on the Latin American Guerrillas Dataset published by Kreiman

Political Wing: A binary variable indicating the presence of a formal political wing within the rebel group.

Political Indoctrination: A binary variable with 1 for groups that exercise political indoctrination and 0 otherwise.

Rebel Propaganda: A binary variable with 1 for groups with propaganda structures and 0 otherwise.

Splinter: A binary variable with 1 for groups originating as splinters and 0 otherwise.

External Support: A binary variable capturing external support from foreign states or non-state actors.

Cohesion: A binary variable coded 1 for cohesive groups, and 0 for fragmented ones.

4.4   Results

In this section, I present the results of the statistical analysis on the rhetorical transformation of non-participant and participant rebel groups in response to peace negotiations. The findings provide evidence for the salience of peace as a political issue, demonstrating distinct patterns of moderation and radicalisation.

The mean differences in rhetorical position across negotiation phases, presented in Table 4.2, show the rhetorical transformation during peace negotiations of participants and non-participants, across Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala. In Colombia, the analysis of the mean differences shows that during most negotiations, participants tended to experience greater fluctuations in the rhetorical position compared to non-participants. For example, during the La Uribe Negotiations (1984-1986), participants had a positive value during the negotiation period (0.431), which significantly dropped post-negotiation (-0.038). In contrast,

(2024) in Revolutionary days: Introducing the Latin American Guerrillas Dataset.

Country	Negotiation	Negotiation Period	Participation	During	Post	Pre	Pre vs During	During vs Post
Colombia	La Uribe Negotiations	1984-1986	Non-Participants	0.221	-0.350	NA	NA	-0.571
			Participants	0.431	-0.038	0.505	-0.075	-0.469
	M-19 Negotiations	1988-1990	Non-Participants	0.038	-0.410	0.221	-0.183	-0.447
			Participants	-0.111	-0.024	0.373	-0.484	0.087
	EPL, PRT Negotiations	1990-1991	Non-Participants	0.219	-0.446	0.181	0.038	-0.665
			Participants	0.054	-0.028	0.247	-0.193	-0.082
	Tlaxcala Negotiations	1992	Non-Participants	-0.232	-0.476	0.189	-0.421	-0.244
			Participants	0.356	-0.037	0.211	0.145	-0.392
	CRS Negotiations	1993-1994	Non-Participants	0.112	-0.534	0.115	-0.002	-0.647
			Participants	0.263	-0.062	0.218	0.044	-0.325
	Viana Negotiations	1998	Non-Participants	-0.850	-0.518	0.115	-0.965	0.333
			Participants	0.423	-0.156	0.251	0.172	-0.579
	Meeting Zone Negotiations	2000	Non-Participants	0.016	-0.645	0.084	-0.068	-0.661
			Participants	0.660	-0.199	0.270	0.390	-0.859
	Peace Summit Negotiations	2002	Non-Participants	-2.255	-0.424	0.063	-2.318	1.831
			Participants	-1.289	-0.203	0.282	-1.570	1.086
	Uribe-ELN Negotiations	2005-2008	Non-Participants	-0.719	-0.293	-0.115	-0.604	0.426
			Participants	-0.044	-0.150	0.170	-0.214	-0.106
	FARC Negotiations	2012-2016	Non-Participants	0.009	-0.671	-0.196	0.204	-0.680
			Participants	-0.148	-0.161	0.123	-0.271	-0.013
	Duque-ELN Negotiations	2017-2019	Non-Participants	-0.455	-0.888	-0.166	-0.289	-0.433
			Participants	-0.009	-0.205	0.094	-0.103	-0.196
	Total Peace	2022-2024	Non-Participants	-0.948	NA	-0.199	-0.749	NA
			Participants	-0.223	-0.216	0.067	-0.290	0.007
El Salvador	Chapultepec Accords	1987-1996	Non-Participants	0.236	NA	NA	NA	NA
			Participants	NA	0.375	0.288	NA	NA
Guatemala	Guatemala Peace Talks	1987-1996	Non-Participants	0.451	NA	NA	NA	NA
			Participants	NA	0.557	0.169	NA	NA

Table 4.2: Mean Differences in Rhetorical Position across Negotiation Phases

non-participants showed a decline in both phases, suggesting that active involvement in negotiations may have mitigated some of the negative effects. A similar trend can be observed in the M-19 Negotiations (1988-1990), where non-participants experienced a more severe post-negotiation decline (-0.410) compared to participants (-0.024).

The Uribe-ELN Negotiations (2005-2008) present an interesting case, as both participants and non-participants recorded negative values during the negotiation period (-0.044 and -0.719, respectively). However, post-negotiation results indicate that participants experienced a smaller decrease (-0.150) compared to non-participants (-0.293), suggesting that participation may have provided some buffer against negative outcomes. Non-participants in the FARC Negotiations (2012-2016) also experienced negative outcomes, that suggest radical-

isation with their values changing from 0.009 during negotiations to -0.671 post-negotiation. Similarly, in the Duque-ELN Negotiations (2017-2019), non-participants recorded a pre-negotiation value of -0.166, which worsened to -0.888 post-negotiation.

El Salvador's Chapultepec Accords (1987-1996) show different trends, as participants recorded a positive post-negotiation value (0.375). This suggests that those who engaged in the peace process may have benefited from the accords. Similarly, in Guatemala, the Guatemala Peace Talks (1987-1996) show a favourable outcome for participants post-negotiation (0.557) compared to their pre-negotiation status (0.169).

These findings suggest that rhetoric among non-participants is likely shaped by the salience of the peace negotiation supporting, Hypothesis 1. In the FARC negotiations (2012-2016) and in the Duque-ELN Negotiations (2017-2019), the increase of the number of spoiler groups, support also Hypothesis 2 for rhetorical radicalisation.

To assess whether peace negotiations influence rhetoric, I conducted a paired t-test to compare pre-negotiation, during negotiation, and post-negotiation periods. In the pre-negotiation versus during negotiation analysis the results indicate a significant shift toward moderation during negotiations (t = 2.91, p = 0.0077), with a mean difference of 0.344. This suggests that as peace becomes a salient issue, rebel groups adjust their rhetoric accordingly. However, no statistically significant change was observed between the negotiation period and the post-negotiation phase (t = 1.25, p = 0.2237). This implies that the moderation effect does not necessarily persist beyond the peace talks.

To test whether rhetorical position differs significantly across negotiation phases, I conducted an ANOVA. In Table 4.3 the results indicate that the negotiation phase has a highly significant effect on rhetorical position ($F = 8.54, p < 0.01$), confirming that rebel groups change their rhetoric across different stages of the peace process. The country-level differences are also significant ($F = 4.55, p = 0.013$), suggesting that rhetorical transformations vary by national context. Furthermore, the participation status is also significant ($F = 16.07, p = 0.000141$), meaning that participants and non-participants experience

rhetorical transformations differently. These findings support Hypothesis 1, which posits that non-participants will adjust their rhetoric when peace becomes a salient political issue.

Factor	DF	F-value	p-value
Negotiation Phase	2	8.54	0.000451 ***
Country	2	4.55	0.013598 *
Participation Status	1	16.07	0.000141 ***
Residuals	76	-	-

Note: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001., . p<0.1

Table 4.3: ANOVA Results: Rhetorical Position Across Negotiation Phases

To determine which negotiation phases differ significantly, I conducted a Tukey HSD test. Table 4.4 shows that rhetorical position differs significantly between pre-negotiation and during negotiation ($p = 0.0104$) and between pre-negotiation and post-negotiation ($p = 0.0004$). However, the difference between during and post-negotiation is not significant ($p = 0.568$). This suggests that most rhetorical transformation occurs early in the negotiation process, with positions stabilising in the post-negotiation phase.

Non-participants exhibit more extreme transformation in rhetorical position compared to participants, as indicated by the significant difference between these two groups ($p = 0.0002$). This supports the expectation that excluded groups are more responsive to changes in the broader conflict environment, including the salience of peace. It also aligns with their need to remain relevant in the absence of formal negotiation roles. Additionally, country-level comparisons show that while rhetorical changes in Guatemala and El Salvador are more pronounced than in Colombia, these differences do not reach statistical significance ($p > 0.05$), suggesting a more generalisable trend across cases.

The findings provide support for Hypothesis 1, indicating that both participants and non-participants adjust their rhetoric when peace negotiations become politically salient. The tendency of some excluded non-participant groups to radicalise suggests a potential link to the absence of formal political structures, which is in line with the expectations of Hypothesis 2, though further investigation is needed to confirm this mechanism.

These results indicate that most rhetorical transformation occurs during negotiations,

Comparison	Mean Difference	95% CI	p-value
Post-Negotiation vs. During	-0.10	(-0.33, 0.13)	0.56
Pre-Negotiation vs. During	0.29	(0.05, 0.53)	0.01 *
Pre-Negotiation vs. Post	0.39	(0.15, 0.63)	0.00 ***
El Salvador vs. Colombia	0.42	(-0.09, 0.93)	0.13
Guatemala vs. Colombia	0.51	(-0.003, 1.03)	0.05 *
Guatemala vs. El Salvador	0.09	(-0.62, 0.80)	0.94
Participants vs. Non-Participants	0.32	(0.16, 0.48)	0.00 ***

Note: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001., . p<0.1

Table 4.4: Tukey HSD Post-Hoc Test for Rhetorical Position Changes

confirming that peace negotiations drive rhetorical transformation. However, since the post-agreement phase is not significantly different from the negotiation phase, it suggests that the moderation effect persists rather than reversing toward radicalisation.

To understand the drivers of rhetorical change, I estimated separate OLS regression models for participants and non-participants [7]. Table 4.5 shows the differences in how these groups respond to peace negotiations.

The rhetorical position is measured on a scale where higher values reflect more moderate rhetoric. The regression shows that participant groups with political wings moderate their rhetoric significantly, while this effect is not significant for non-participants. This suggests that formal political structures support moderation primarily when groups are included in negotiations, whereas exclusion limits the moderating effect of institutionalisation.

Also, the political indoctrination and propaganda drive radical rhetoric in both groups, but more strongly among non-participants. Additionally, splinter groups are consistently more radical than their parent organisations. Regarding external support, it encourages moderation in participants but promotes slight radicalisation among non-participants.

These findings confirm that peace negotiations serve as a critical point for rhetorical transformation, particularly among participant groups. However, the absence of significant rhetorical change post-negotiation suggests that while peace talks prevent radical backsliding, they do not necessarily lead to further moderation.

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[7]The errors were clustered at country level.

Table 4.5: OLS Regression Results: Participants vs. Non-Participants

	Dependent variable:	
	Rhetorical Position	
	Participants	Non-Participants
	(1)	(2)
Political Wing	0.219**	0.127
	(0.104)	(0.079)
Political Indoctrination	−0.227**	−0.404***
	(0.109)	(0.085)
Rebel Propaganda	−0.552***	−0.335***
	(0.109)	(0.106)
Splinter Faction	−0.594***	−0.643***
	(0.211)	(0.148)
External Support	0.216**	−0.132
	(0.094)	(0.085)
Cohesion	−0.229*	0.043
	(0.136)	(0.127)
Constant	0.666***	0.623***
	(0.163)	(0.155)
Observations	103	218
R^2	0.340	0.194
Adjusted R^2	0.299	0.172
Residual Std. Error	0.439 (df = 96)	0.504 (df = 211)
F Statistic	8.250*** (df = 6; 96)	8.489*** (df = 6; 211)

Note:	$^{*}p<0.1$; $^{**}p<0.05$; $^{***}p<0.01$

Moreover, OLS results indicate that political wings and external support facilitate rhetorical moderation, while political indoctrination, propaganda, and splinter factions reinforce radicalisation. These findings suggest that external actors and policymakers should focus on integrating non-participants into peace processes and discouraging factionalism to promote long-term stability.

4.5   Discussion

The results from the OLS regression models and statistical tests provide strong empirical support for the proposed framework regarding the rhetorical changes of non-participant rebel groups in response to peace negotiations. The findings align with the theoretical expectations that issue salience influences rhetorical transformation, and that factors within rebel groups determine their likelihood of rhetorical moderation or radicalisation.

The paired t-test comparing pre-negotiation and during-negotiation rhetorical positions suggests that peace negotiations create a significant shift towards moderation. This supports Hypothesis 1, which posited that both participant and non-participant groups are more likely to moderate their rhetoric when peace becomes a salient political issue. However, the lack of a statistically significant difference between the during- and post-negotiation phases suggests that rhetorical shifts occur primarily during the negotiation process, with limited further changes afterwards.

The OLS regression results highlight the role of internal political structures in determining rhetorical choices. For participant groups, the presence of a political wing and external support positively predicts moderation, while political indoctrination and rebel propaganda are strongly associated with radicalisation. For non-participants, political indoctrination and rebel propaganda also drive radicalisation, while a political wing does not reach statistical significance. This partially supports Hypothesis 2, reinforcing that formal political structures facilitate moderation but suggesting that they may play a weaker role for non-participants.

The OLS results confirm that splinter groups are more likely to radicalise in response to peace negotiations, as the splinter variable has a strong negative effect on rhetorical moderation for both participants and non-participants. This confirms that splinter groups, often seeking ideological purity, react to peace processes by intensifying their radical rhetoric, acting as spoilers rather than moderates.

The ANOVA results reinforce the importance of participation status in determining

rhetorical transformation.   There is a highly significant effect of participation status on rhetorical positioning indicating that participant groups move towards moderation more than non-participant groups. However, non-participants do show a degree of responsiveness, likely due to strategic considerations of future inclusion created by the salience of peace.

The Tukey post-hoc test suggests that rhetorical shifts are not uniform across all cases. While Guatemala shows some significant differences from Colombia, the country-level factor is less significant than participation status, implying that contextual variables matter but are secondary to group-level incentives.

These results demonstrate that peace processes have broader impacts outside the negotiation table as they affect all the actors present in the multi-party conflict. The findings support the literature of political integration and third party role in peace negotiations.

By focusing on non-participant groups, this study contributes to moving beyond the binary distinction between participants versus spoilers, to present a more comprehensive profile of non-participant groups and the incentives created by peace negotiations for rhetorical transformation. Even when groups are excluded from the talks, they engage with the issue of peace and realign their rhetoric to keep relevant, legitimate and to prepare for the possible inclusion in future processes.

4.6   Conclusion

In this paper, I analyse if peace agreement negotiations influence the rhetorical strategies of non-participating rebel groups, focusing on issue salience and political structures. The empirical analysis supports the central claim that peace negotiations create new political dynamics that influence the rhetorical strategies of armed groups. Specifically, while the salience of peace encourages moderation among some non-participants, others, particularly splinter groups, respond by radicalising to maintain ideological purity and relevance.

The findings contribute to the broader literature on conflict resolution and rebel gov-

ernance by emphasising the role of political structures in shaping armed groups' rhetorical transformation. Rebel groups with formal political institutions exhibit a greater tendency toward moderation, suggesting that they view peace negotiations as an opportunity for political integration. This supports the argument that groups with the institutional capacity for governance are more likely to engage with peace processes, as they can envision a transition from armed struggle to political participation.

Conversely, the results confirm that splinter groups are more ideologically rigid factions and are less likely to moderate their rhetoric. The strong negative relationship between the splinter variable and rhetorical moderation in both participant and non-participant groups suggests that breakaway factions often seek to preserve their ideological purity by rejecting peace processes. These findings align with the spoiler literature, which suggests that radical factions may escalate their rhetoric to undermine peace efforts.

Moreover, the statistical tests demonstrate that rhetorical moderation is most pronounced during the negotiation phase, with no significant change post-negotiation. This suggests that rhetorical transformation is driven more by the immediate negotiation context than by lasting ideological change. Non-participant groups adjust their rhetoric primarily in response to the increased salience of peace rather than due to a fundamental change in their political stance. This has important implications for policymakers and mediators, as it suggests that incentives for moderation must be sustained beyond the negotiation period to prevent post-settlement backsliding.

The results reinforce the idea that peace processes should prioritise the inclusion of politically structured rebel groups, as these actors are more likely to moderate their rhetoric and engage in peaceful political competition. Efforts to encourage rebel groups to establish political wings before negotiations could enhance their likelihood of adopting moderation as a long-term strategy.

Given the strong tendency of splinter groups to radicalise in response to peace negotiations, peace processes must account for the risk of fragmentation. If a major faction within

a rebel group is excluded or disagrees with the terms of negotiation, the likelihood of spoilers increases, as in the case of the dissident groups after the Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and FARC in 2016. Mediation efforts should consider pre-emptive measures to minimise splintering, such as offering alternative pathways to participation for dissenting factions or addressing grievances that might drive fragmentation, including peace agreement implementation.

The finding that rhetorical moderation occurs primarily during the negotiation phase suggests that peace negotiations create a window of opportunity for shifting narratives around conflict. Policymakers and mediators should capitalise on this period by reinforcing incentives for moderation, such as offering political participation opportunities, external support, or amnesty programmes, to ensure that moderate rhetoric translates into long-term commitment to peace.

The regression results indicate that external support plays a mixed role in influencing rhetorical strategies. While it is positively associated with moderation in participant groups, it does not significantly affect non-participants' choices. This suggests that international actors can play a role in shaping rhetorical moderation, but their influence may be stronger when groups are already engaged in negotiations. Future research could explore how different types of external support such as diplomatic, financial, or military, affect the rhetorical choices of non-participant groups.

While this study provides a foundation for understanding how non-participant rebel groups adjust their rhetoric in response to peace negotiations, several avenues for future research remain such as whether these rhetorical transformations translate into long-term political behaviour, such as actual participation in electoral processes or governance structures. Also, in-depth case studies could provide more information about the motivations and decision-making processes of specific non-participant groups. Additionally, while the study assumes that peace negotiations increase the salience of moderation, further research could empirically assess how shifts in public opinion, media narratives, and civil society activism

influence rebel group rhetoric.

While peace is the central issue in the cases analysed here, issue ownership is not static across conflict contexts. Rebel groups can compete over a wide array of ideological issues depending on the broader discursive and conflict environment. In some settings, negotiations focus on economic redistribution, secularism, indigenous rights, or anti-imperialist resistance, each of which could be owned by different actors. For example, in India, the Naxalite insurgents, primarily motivated by class-based grievances (Ahuja and Ganguly, 2007), can respond differently to peace overtures than insurgent groups in Kashmir, where religious identity and territorial autonomy dominate the rhetorical field (Rai, 2018). Additionally, the response can be influenced by how the government claims ownership of various issues beyond peace, as well as the signalling for inclusion or exclusion. Future research could test whether the patterns of rhetorical adaptation identified in this study hold when the core issue at stake shifts from peace to other ideologically charged domains. This would allow for a broader application of the issue ownership framework across diverse rebel ideologies and goals.

Some limitations should be acknowledged in this analysis. First, the analysis primarily relies on Wordfish scores generated from documents which may not fully capture the complexities of discourse, especially nuanced ideological shifts or internal factional debates within rebel groups. Future research incorporating qualitative discourse analysis or interviews could provide deeper insights. Second, the study assumes that peace negotiations increase the salience of moderation, but it does not directly measure how public opinion, media narratives, or government propaganda shape rebel group rhetoric. Incorporating public opinion data or sentiment analysis of media coverage could help clarify these external influences. Finally, the study's findings may not be fully generalisable across all conflict settings, as the sample covers Marxist guerrillas from three Latin American countries. Future research could explore these dynamics in groups from other ideological families and other regions.

Peace negotiations do not simply generate consensus, they create new arenas of compe-

tition where armed groups must decide whether to moderate, remain neutral, or radicalise their rhetoric. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for designing more effective peace processes that maximise inclusivity while minimising the risks posed by spoilers. By recognising the rhetorical transformation of both participant and non-participant groups, policymakers and mediators can craft more sustainable peace agreements that account for the diverse motivations driving rebel group discourse.

Appendix 4.A   Constructing the Latent Variable for Rhetorical Change

To measure rhetorical change, this study employs Wordfish, an unsupervised statistical model for scaling text data. Wordfish positions documents along an ideological spectrum based on the frequency and distribution of specific words. This approach is particularly effective for analysing rhetorical moderation and radicalisation over time.

Methodology

The construction of the latent variable, *rhetorical_position*, followed these steps:

1. **Preprocessing**: Texts were standardised to ensure comparability. This involved removing stop words, handling linguistic variations, and normalising terminology across documents.

2. **Scaling**: Wordfish was applied to estimate the position of each text on an ideological spectrum. The model assumes a Poisson distribution for word frequencies:

$$y_{ij} \sim \text{Poisson}(\lambda_{ij}),$$

where y_{ij} represents the count of word j in document i, and λ_{ij} is the expected frequency of word j in document i.

3. **Latent Parameter Estimation**: The expected frequency λ_{ij} is modelled as:

$$\ln(\lambda_{ij}) = \alpha_i + \psi_j + \beta_i \cdot \theta_j,$$

where:

- α_i: Document-specific fixed effects capturing document length.

- ψ_j: Word-specific fixed effects capturing the overall frequency of word j.

- β_i: Ideological position of document i on the latent spectrum.

- θ_j: Word-specific weight indicating its association with the latent dimension.

4. **Aggregation**: Document-level scores were averaged for each group-year to compute the annualised latent variable, *rhetorical_position*, reflecting shifts in moderation or radicalization.

Wordfish Word Parameters

Figure 4.4 presents the estimated word parameters from the Wordfish scaling model. Each point represents a term from the document-feature matrix, plotted according to its estimated discrimination parameter ($\hat{\beta}$) on the x-axis and its fixed effect ($\hat{\psi}$) on the y-axis.

The discrimination parameter ($\hat{\beta}$) reflects how informative a word is for distinguishing positions along the latent ideological dimension: higher absolute values indicate stronger discrimination. The fixed effect ($\hat{\psi}$) captures overall word frequency, with lower values indicating less frequent terms.

The plot reveals a dense concentration of frequently used, low-discrimination words near the origin, while rarer, more ideologically charged terms appear further to the right, reflecting their strong association with specific positions. These results suggest that the model successfully identifies both general discourse and niche ideological markers, supporting the robustness of the estimated latent positions.
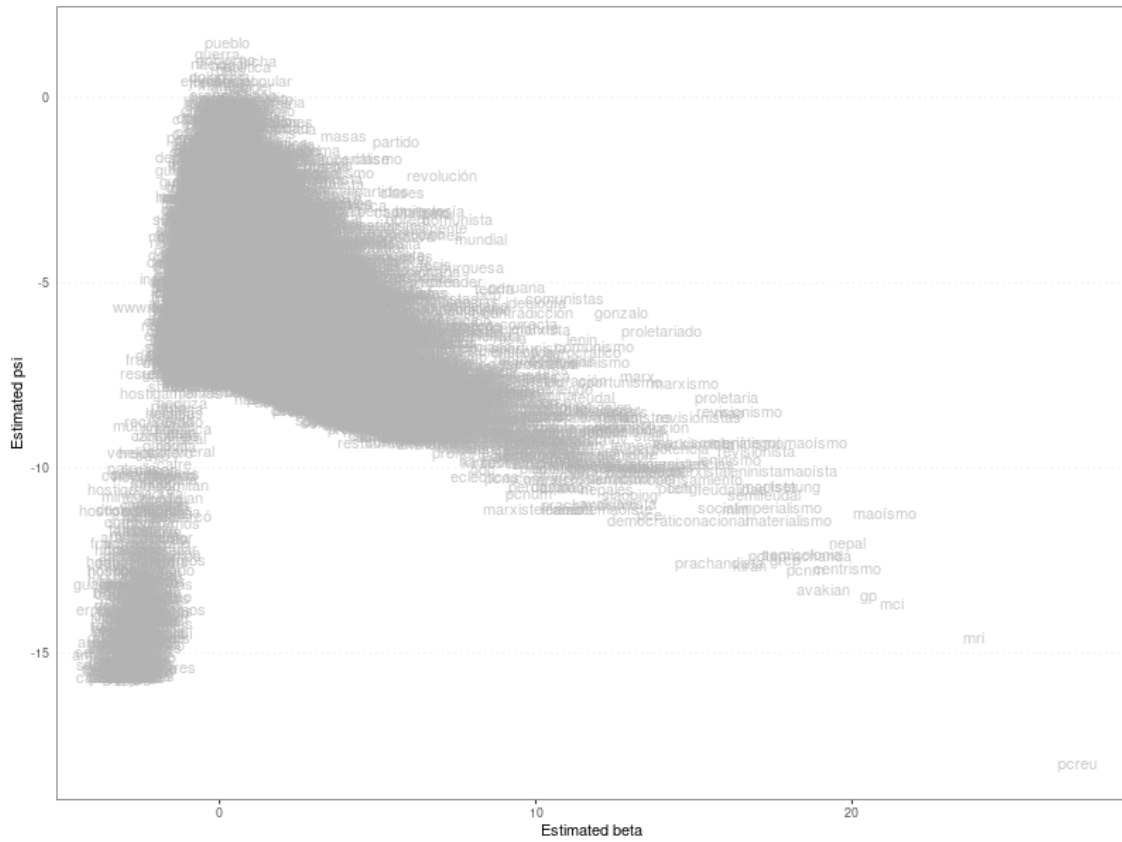
Figure 4.4: Wordfish Word Parameter Estimates.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined the ideological transformation of armed groups, specifically focusing on Latin American and Colombian rebel organisations, through the integrated application of qualitative case studies, interviews, and computational methods. The findings demonstrate that ideology within rebel movements is not a fixed and homogeneous entity but a dynamic, adaptive resource shaped by both internal and external pressures. Armed groups within the same ideological family craft and revise their ideological positions in response to political opportunity structures, strategic competition, peace processes, and legitimacy imperatives. The M-19 case illustrates how the mechanisms of differentiation, distinguishing themselves from rival movements and legitimisation, cultivating public and political support, enabled ideological change. Likewise, the study of rhetorical transformation among participant and non-participant groups during peace negotiations reveals how salience, institutional structures, and splintering dynamics drive divergent rhetorical strategies.

A central conceptual contribution of this research is the articulation of micro-ideologies as an analytical category. By disaggregating ideology into its constituent normative, goal, and frame dimensions, the thesis shows nuanced differences among groups that would otherwise be categorised under a singular ideological label. This approach not only provides a more accurate portrait of intra-ideological variation but also facilitates, for future research, a

deeper understanding of group behaviour, including tactical choices, patterns of violence, and responses to negotiation. The integration of machine learning techniques enabled the identification of recurring ideological patterns and clusters across Latin American rebel groups, enhancing the robustness of the theoretical claims. Overall, the findings contribute to the literature on civil war, rebel governance, and political ideology by framing ideological transformation as a strategic and contingent process, not merely an expression of fixed beliefs.

The empirical findings also emphasised the influence of peace negotiations on rebel rhetoric. Negotiations were found to produce a rhetorical change among some groups, encouraging moderation and strategic repositioning. However, this effect was not uniform. Splinter factions, often motivated by ideological purism and organisational grievances, responded by radicalising their discourse to maintain distinctiveness and resist compromise. This pattern confirms theories of spoiler behaviour and points to the role of negotiations as a new arena for ideological contestation rather than a simple mechanism for conflict resolution.

5.1   Policy Implications

The findings generated by this research have important implications for peacebuilding, conflict mediation, and counterinsurgency policy. First and foremost, the findings suggest that ideology should not be treated as monolithic when engaging with armed groups. Policymakers and negotiators must recognise the internal heterogeneity of rebel movements and tailor strategies accordingly. A group's specific micro-ideological orientation will influence not only its willingness to negotiate but also its likely behaviour during and after peace processes. Recognising these granular ideological distinctions across normative constraints, conflict goals, and, conflict frame can inform more precise and effective engagement strategies, helping to identify points of flexibility and rigidity within rebel organisations.

Second, the study underscores the dynamic nature of ideology. Ideological change is not merely reactive or imposed but often internally driven, shaped by inter-group competition,

legitimacy needs, and broader shifts in political opportunity structures. Peacebuilding interventions must therefore account for the strategic and contingent character of ideological transformation. Efforts that support political legitimacy, offer pathways for differentiation, or amplify moderate ideological currents within movements may catalyse internal change that contributes to long-term peacebuilding.

Third, the evidence suggests that rebel groups with established political structures are more likely to moderate their rhetoric and pursue political integration during peace negotiations. Supporting the institutional development of such groups prior to and during negotiation phases may increase the likelihood of durable settlements. Conversely, splinter factions, often characterised by ideological rigidity, pose an increased risk of undermining peace agreements. Policymakers should consider proactive measures such as alternative participation frameworks, grievance redress mechanisms, and post-agreement incentives to mitigate the spoiler effect.

Finally, the conceptual lens of micro-ideologies also has implications for early warning and conflict prevention frameworks. Monitoring subtle changes in ideological framing, rather than relying on broad ideological categories, may offer more sensitive indicators of strategic repositioning and emerging risks. This could enable more adaptive and forward-looking policy responses in fragile settings.

5.2 Limitations

While this research provides new ways to understand ideological variation within rebel groups, it is important to reflect on the limitations and trade-offs that shape its findings. First, the qualitative analysis was constrained by limited access to internal documents and private communications from armed groups, the ones obtained were from former members, so it was limited to some organisations. As a result, the analysis primarily relies on public documents, such as manifestos and speeches. To support the validity of these public sources, interviews

with former combatants and experts helped to reflect how groups choose to present themselves both externally and internally.

Second, the computational analysis relies on models such as Wordfish and supervised classifiers, which are effective at detecting large-scale patterns in textual data but less sensitive to subtle rhetorical features. Changes in tone, irony, and coded language, are harder to detect in these models. Future work could address this limitation by integrating manual annotation of rhetorical cues, using more advanced context-aware models such as BERT and LLAMA, or combining text analysis with discourse analysis approaches.

Third, while the study focuses empirically on Marxist-inspired guerrilla groups in Latin America, particularly in Colombia, this single-region, single-ideology focus enables a deeper exploration of mechanisms and variation within one ideological family. This approach makes it possible to trace how micro-ideologies operate over time and across organisations with similar foundations. While this limits generalisability to other ideological families, it strengthens causal plausibility and conceptual clarity. Expanding the empirical base to include groups from other ideological traditions such as Islamist or Nationalist movements would enhance comparative leverage and allow further testing of the framework's applicability.

Finally, this research does not examine the long-term consequences of ideological change beyond the conflict period. Whether rhetorical transformations during war translate into durable changes in political behaviour and governance practices remains an open question. Future research could follow post-conflict trajectories to assess whether changes in framing, goals, and normative constraints persist once groups transition into political actors.

5.3 Directions for Future Research

This thesis demonstrates that ideology is a dynamic and strategic component of armed group. By examining how rebel organisations construct, adapt, and deploy ideological narratives, we gain a deeper understanding of their decisions in war and peace. The findings of this

thesis are academically significant and essential for designing more inclusive, resilient, and informed peace processes in contexts of protracted armed conflict.

This study lays the foundation for several promising avenues of future research into ideological transformation in armed movements. One important next step is to assess the extent to which rhetorical and ideological change translate into behavioural change, rather than remaining primarily symbolic. Do changes in public discourse reflect shifts in tactics, targeting, and organisational priorities, or are they strategic performances aimed at external audiences such as governments, international mediators, or domestic constituencies? Answering this question is essential for understanding the operational consequences of ideological rearticulation.

Future research could build on this study in several directions. First, the micro-ideology framework, should be tested in other regional and ideological contexts to assess its broader applicability. Rebel groups inspired by religious fundamentalism, ethnic nationalism, or right-wing extremism may exhibit different dynamics in how they frame conflict, articulate goals, and establish normative constraints. Investigating how micro-ideological variation manifests in these settings could clarify which elements of the framework are generalisable and which are context-dependent.

Another direction involves extending the concept of micro-ideologies beyond non-state rebel groups. There is growing interest in whether this framework could be applied to hybrid armed actors, such as Hezbollah or the Houthis. These organisations often engage in ideologically driven communication while maintaining formal political power, and their rhetorical positioning may follow similar patterns of legitimation and differentiation identified in rebel groups.

Additionally, future work could examine how ideological principles endure, adapt, and dissipate in the post-conflict phase. Investigating whether rhetorical changes during wartime lead to lasting changes in political identity and institutional behaviour could contribute to broader debates on political integration, party formation, and the afterlives of armed move-

ments. Also, internal factional dynamics, including generational divides, splits within leadership, and uneven command and control, can shape rhetorical transformations. Exploring how intra-organisational cleavages influence public discourse could help explain inconsistent messaging and abrupt ideological pivots.

Moreover, the role of digital media and social networks in shaping ideological narratives has become increasingly central in contemporary conflict. Online platforms enable rebel groups to circumvent traditional gatekeepers, amplify their ideological messages, and connect with dispersed or diasporic audiences. Understanding how these tools reshape ideological expression, diffusion, and adaptation is crucial to analysing modern insurgency discourse and rebel communication strategies.

Finally, future studies could benefit from a more explicit integration of public opinion, media discourse, and civil society dynamics into the analysis of rebel rhetoric and micro-ideology. These factors likely influence not only how rebel groups craft their messages but also the broader reception and effectiveness of ideological transformation. Longitudinal case studies and cross-national datasets could be instrumental in analysing these dynamics and strengthening our understanding of the interplay between ideology, rhetoric, and political outcomes in civil wars.

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