Defining Concepts

POSC 3410 – Quantitative Methods in Political Science

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Goal for Today

Introduce students to clarifying, identifying, and defining concepts.

Concepts in Politics

Concepts pervade discussion about politics in all facets.

- The U.S. flexes its "power" in the international system.
- "Corruption" is rampant in several post-Soviet states.
- American politics is beset with problems of "polarization" and "partisanship."
- The "developing" world is replete with failed attempts at "democratization."
- Somalia and Afghanistan are examples of "failed states."
- "Democracies" have never fought a "war" against each other.
- "Old school racism" was replaced by "racial resentment" after the Civil Rights movement.

These are just examples.

What Are Concepts?

Concepts are ideas of mental constructs that represent phenomena in the real world.

- We can't sense them (e.g. see, taste, smell), per se.
- They can be simple (e.g. partisanship) or complicated (e.g. corruption).
- They are *not* value-laden.

What Are Concepts?

Concepts intuitively vary among units in the real world.

- The U.S. is more "powerful" than Nicaragua.
- Kazakhstan is more "corrupt" than Norway.
- Canada is more democratic than Angola.

Variation in the Real World

This leads to questions we want to answer:

- Why is Western Europe more "peaceful" than South Asia?
- Why are some Americans "intolerant" of social and political difference?
- How is "partisanship" increasing in the U.S.?

Conceptual and Concrete Questions

Conceptual questions are expressed using ideas and are hard to answer.

It's better to to ask **concrete questions.**

- These carry with it a priori beliefs about what "counts" as the concept in question.

Asking Concrete Questions

Here's a toy example: are women more "liberal" than men?

- This is definitely answerable, provided we have a definition of "liberal."

A **conceptual definition** describes the concept's measurable properties and units of analysis.

- From there, we create an **operational definition** of actually implementing the conceptual definition.

Defining "Liberalism"

Consider this definition: "Liberalism is the extent to which individuals support increased government spending for social programs."

- It takes vague idea of "liberalism" and refers to measurable attribute of social spending.
- Use of "the extent to which" notes that this attribute varies across unit.
- More support for social spending should coincide with "more liberalism."
- It also specifies a unit of analysis: people.

Clarifying Liberalism

There are three problems in clarifying concepts.

1. Defining a concept with another concept.
2. Defining a concept with unmeasurable attributes.
3. Treating multi-dimensional concepts as unidimensional.

Clarifying Liberalism

What comes to mind when we think of "liberalism" in American politics?

- This is naturally juxtaposed with "conservatism."

Long story short: who looks like a "liberal" and who looks like a "conservative?"

Images of Liberals and Conservatives

Liberal	Conservative
Has low income	Has high income
Is younger	Is older
Supports social justice	Opposes social justice
Opposes free market	Supports free market
Supports government-sponsored health care	Opposes government-sponsored health care
Opposes tax cuts	Supports tax cuts
Opposes abortion restrictions	Supports abortion restrictions
Supports same-sex marriage	Opposes same-sex marriage

Do note this brainstorming is an open-ended process.

Problems with These Images

Prima facie, these "sound about right."

- However, our task is to put a concept into operation, not stereotype.

Think of the first two components: income and age.

- Is being young and/or poor really part of "liberalism?"
- Can we think of what it means to be "liberal" without these?

The answer should be a clear "yes."

- Don't misunderstand: age and income clearly correlate with liberalism.
- However they are not themselves "liberal" values.

Condensed Images of Liberals and Conservatives

Liberal	Conservative
Supports social justice	Opposes social justice
Opposes free market	Supports free market
Supports government-sponsored health care	Opposes government-sponsored health care
Opposes tax cuts	Supports tax cuts
Opposes abortion restrictions	Supports abortion restrictions
Supports same-sex marriage	Opposes same-sex marriage

Are we satisfied with these?

More Problems with These Images

Prima facie, these also "sound about right."

- However, we need to be more discerning.

The first two of these condensed images do not belong. Why?

More Problems with These Images

1. They're not immediately measurable.
2. These include abstract concepts—e.g. "free market", "social justice"—that demand further clarification.

If you can only "know it when you see it" (a la Potter Stewart), then you must dig deeper.

Further Condensed Images of Liberals and Conservatives

Liberals	Conservatives
Supports government-sponsored health care	Opposes government-sponsored health care
Opposes tax cuts	Supports tax cuts
Opposes abortion restrictions	Supports abortion restrictions
Supports same-sex marriage	Opposes same-sex marriage

Now are we done?

More Problems with These Images

Once more, these also "sound about right."

- But we have a new issue.

These inventory items seem to cluster naturally into **conceptual dimensions.**

- The first two refer to government spending.
- The second two refer to social issues.

In short, we have a **multimensional concept**, which are common in political science.

- Examples: democracy (norms, institutions), socioeconomic status (income, occupation, education)

Units of Analysis

All conceptual dimensions specify a **unit of analysis** (i.e. the entity we want to describe). We generally have two levels that interest us:

- Individual-level (e.g. citizens, Congressmen)
- Aggregate-level (e.g. classrooms, districts, states, countries)

Concepts can be applicable to both levels.

- Example: we can feasibly think of "liberal" voters and "liberal" states.

Beware the Ecological Fallacy

An **ecological fallacy** is a classic inferential problem.

- This is the use of aggregate-level information to make inferences at the individual-level.
- You can think of this as a form of stereotyping.

Examples of ecological fallacies in political science:

- Immigrants have lower literacy rates, but areas with a lot of immigrants have higher literacy rates.
- Rich voters tend to be Republican. Rich states tend to be Democratic.

Conclusion

Our interest in politics is driven by an interest in certain phenomena.

- However, take care to make clear your concepts of these phenomena.

Concepts need to communicate several things.

- Measurable attributes within the concept itself.
- Variation implicit within the concept itself.
- A unit of analysis to which the concept applies.

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