

Defining Concepts

POSC 3410 – Quantitative Methods in Political Science

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Goal for Today

Clarify, identify, and define concepts.

Concepts in Politics

Concepts pervade discussion about politics in all facets.

- The U.S. flexes its “power” in the international system.
- “Corruption” pervades the politics of the post-Soviet countries.
- Russia is a “revisionist” on the issue of Crimea.
- American politics is beset with problems of “polarization” in “partisanship”.
- The “developing” world is plagued with failed attempts at “democratization”.
- Somalia is a “failed state”.
- “Democracies” have never fought a “war” with each other.
- Americans demonstrate “(social or political) intolerance” post-9/11.

These are just examples.

What are Concepts?

Concepts are ideas or mental constructs that represent real-world phenomena.

- We can't “sense” (e.g. see, taste, smell) them.
- They can be either simple (e.g. partisanship) or complex (e.g. corruption).
- They are *not* value-laden, however.

Concepts also vary among units in the real world.

- The U.S. is more “powerful” than Nicaragua.
- Kazakhstan is more “corrupt” than Norway.
- Republicans are more “conservative” than Democrats.
- Canada is more “democratic” than Angola.

Variation in the Real World

This, naturally, leads to questions we want to answer.

- Why is Western Europe more “peaceful” than South Asia?
- How/why exactly are Americans “intolerant” of difference?
- How is “partisanship” increasing in the United States?

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

- It's better to ask **concrete questions**.
 - These carry with a priori beliefs about what “counts” as the concept in question.

Asking Concrete Questions

To use the book's example: are women more “liberal” than men?

- This is 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 the vague idea of “liberalism” and refers to a measurable attribute of social spending.
- “. . . the extent to which” notes this attribute varies across units.
- More support for social spending should coincide with “more liberalism”.
- It also specifies a unit of analysis.

Clarifying Concepts

There are three problems to avoid 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

Liberals	Conservatives
Low income	High income
Younger	Older
Supports social justice	Opposes social justice
Opposes free market	Supports free market
Supports govt-run health care	Opposes govt-run health care
Opposes tax cuts	Supports tax cuts
Opposes abortion restrictions	Supports abortion restrictions
Supports same-sex marriage	Opposes same-sex marriage

This brainstorming is an open-ended process.

Problems with These Images

Prima facie, these “sound about right”.

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

Think of the first two constructs: income and age.

- Is being young and 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 liberal values themselves.

Condensed Images of Liberals and Conservatives

Liberals	Conservatives
Supports social justice	Opposes social justice
Opposes free market	Supports free market
Supports govt-run health care	Opposes govt-run 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, the answer is again “sounds about right”.

- However, we need to be more discerning.

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

- They're not immediately measurable.
- “Social justice” and “free market” are themselves abstract concepts that beg further clarification.

If you can only “know it when you see it” (a la Potter Stewart), then digging deeper is necessary.

Further Condensed Images of Liberals and Conservatives

Liberals	Conservatives
Supports govt-run health care	Opposes govt-run 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

Prima facie, the answer is once again “sounds about right”.

- However, 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 **multidimensional concept**, which are common in political science.

- Examples: democracy (norms and 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.

Avoid thinking along these lines when you think about your concepts.

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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