

# Concepts

**“I’ll know it when I see it”**

Department of Government  
London School of Economics and Political Science

## 1 Quick Review

## 2 Concepts

## 3 Concepts: Classical Approach

## 4 Concepts: Family Resemblence

## 5 Gerring's Criteria

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# Fundamental problem of causal inference

We can only observe any given case in one reality!

# In Political Science

- Causal inference is about searching for appropriate counterfactuals
- *Causal effect*: Difference in an outcome variable between two counterfactuals
- *Causal inference*: A belief that an event or variable exerts a causal effect on an outcome

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# Concepts

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  - We cannot theorize or study a phenomenon until we know what it is

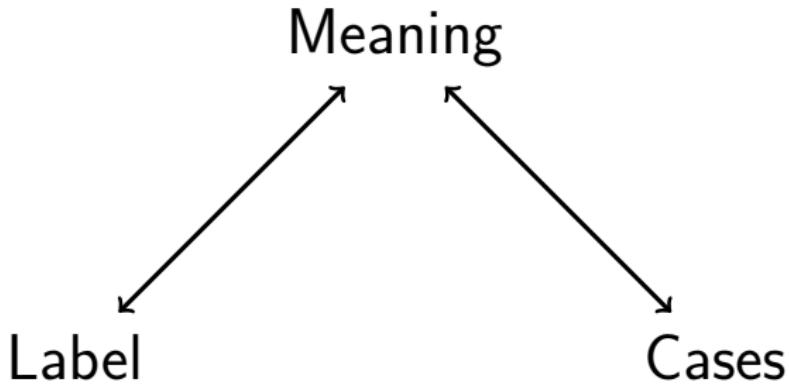
# Concepts

- Definition: The words and ideas that we use to describe the world
- Why do we care?
  - We cannot theorize or study a phenomenon until we know what it is
  - Problem Set 1 is due on October 27.

# Quick Brainstorm

What are some important political science concepts?

# Ogden & Richard's Triangle<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup>Richards, I.A., and Ogden, C.K. 1923 *The Meaning of Meaning*.

Concepts are useful because they distinguish things from other things.

In particular, they:

- Resolve ambiguity
- Avoid vagueness

# Approaches to Concept Definition

- 1 Classical Approach
- 2 Family Resemblance

- Gerring's 7 criteria<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Gerring also offers "minimal," "maximal," and "cumulative" formulations as ways to develop concepts

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# Classical Approach

- Specify a set of “constitutive dimensions” that *are* the concept
  - Fundamental characteristics of the concept
  - Not causes or effects
  - Not measures of the concept

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  - Fundamental characteristics of the concept
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- Dimensions are *necessary and jointly sufficient*

# Boolean Logic

- **AND:** necessary
  - Implies attributes required to be a case of the concept
- **OR:** sufficient
  - Implies multiple ways to be a case of the concept

Attributes may be *individually* or *jointly* necessary and/or sufficient

# Dahl's Definition of Democracy

- Two dimensions
  
- Both necessary and jointly sufficient

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- Both necessary and jointly sufficient
- Without liberalization: “inclusive hegemony”
- Without inclusiveness: “competitive oligarchy”

# Minimal and Maximal

- Gerring uses three types of concept definitions:
  - Minimal
  - Maximal
  - Cumulative
- All three of these are within the classical approach
  - All focus attribute *necessity*

# Questions?

# Define the concept of “chair”



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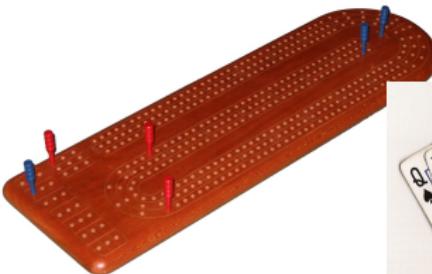
# Family Resemblance

- Classical approach focuses on *necessary* elements
- Some concepts have no necessary elements but are still meaningful

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- Classical approach focuses on *necessary* elements
- Some concepts have no necessary elements but are still meaningful
- We might also think about elements that are *sufficient* to establish membership

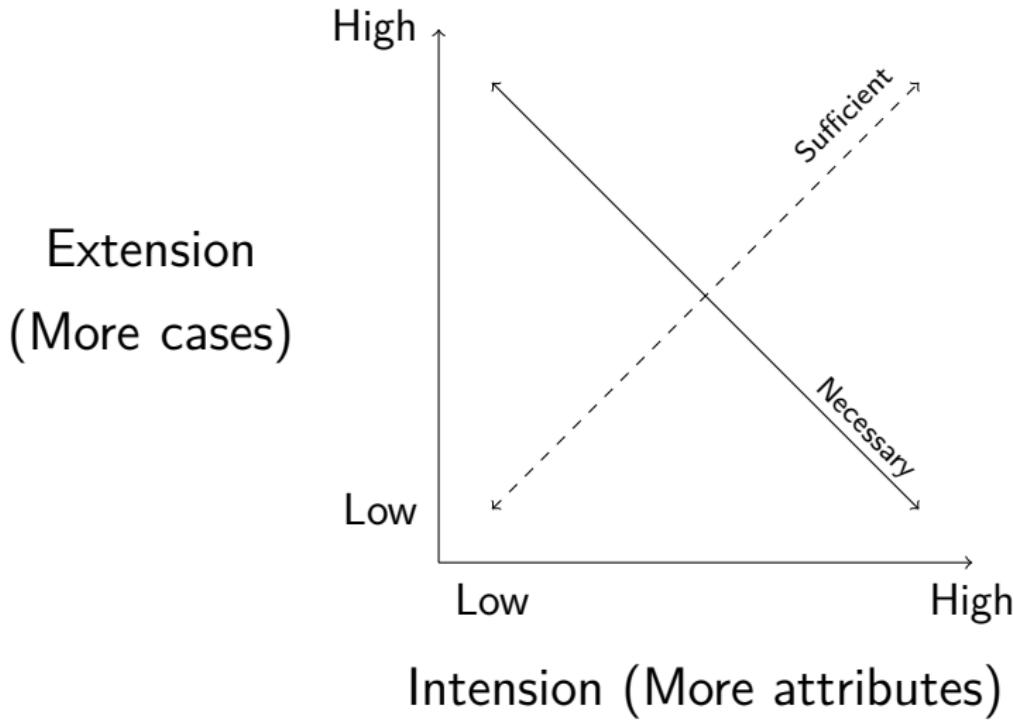
# Example: Define “game”



# Complex Boolean Logic

- Jointly necessary and sufficient:  
Rule of Law  $\wedge$  Equality
- Jointly necessary w/ insufficient attributes  
Rule of Law  $\wedge$  (Equality  $\vee$  Elections)
- Simple family resemblance logic:  
(Equality  $\vee$  Elections)
- Complex family resemblance logic:  
(Rule of Law  $\wedge$  Participation)  $\vee$  (Equality  $\wedge$  Elections)

# Trade-offs



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# Gerring's Criteria

- 1 Resonance
- 2 Domain/scope
- 3 Consistency
- 4 Fecundity
- 5 Differentiation
- 6 Causal utility
- 7 Operationalization (next week)

# In Sum

- We need to know what we're talking about before we can theorize causal relationships or study something empirically
- Concepts vary in their usefulness and are contestable
- Many ways to define and evaluate concepts



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