

Concepts

“I’ll know it when I see it”

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Goal for Today

Develop the ability to formally and precisely *define* “concepts” using two common approaches to concept definition, and beginning thinking about how to assess the quality of competing definitions

- 1 Concepts
- 2 Concepts: Classical Approach
- 3 Concepts: Family Resemblance
- 4 Evaluating Concept Definitions

1 Concepts

2 Concepts: Classical Approach

3 Concepts: Family Resemblance

4 Evaluating Concept Definitions

Concepts

- Definition: The words and ideas that we use to describe the world

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Concepts

- Definition: The words and ideas that we use to describe the world
- Why do we care?
 - We cannot theorize a phenomenon until we know what it is
 - We cannot agree on or debate measure of things until we share a definition of what we're trying to measure
 - Problem Set 1 is due soon

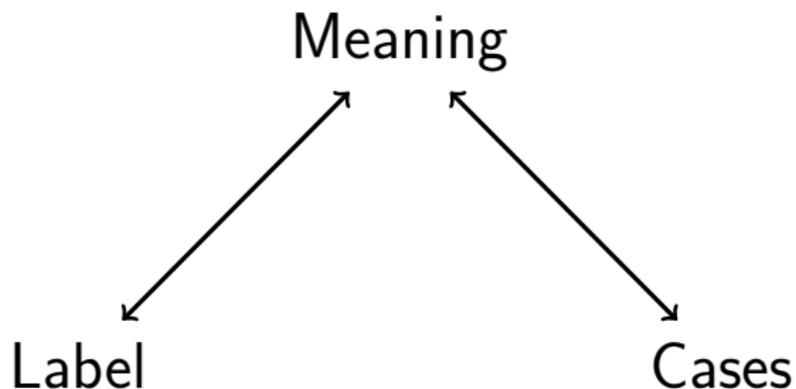
Concepts are useful because they distinguish things from other things.

In particular, they:

- 1 Resolve ambiguity
- 2 Avoid vagueness

This allows us to talk precisely about phenomena without confusion or cross-talk.

Ogden & Richard's Triangle¹



¹Richards, I.A., and Ogden, C.K. 1923 *The Meaning of Meaning*.

Quick Brainstorm

What are some important political science concepts?

Quick Brainstorm

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- Democracy
- Inequality
- Populism
- Extremist
- Nation
- Opinion
- Values
- Ideology
- War
- Liberty
- Political party
- Immigrant
- Social movement
- Authoritarianism
- Development

Approaches to Concept Definition

Two common approaches:

- 1 Classical Approach
- 2 Family Resemblance

There are other ways to define concepts but these are the most important.

Simple Boolean Logic

- **AND:** necessity
 - Represented by \wedge
 - For attributes *required* for a given instance be considered a member of the concept's set
- **OR:** sufficiency
 - Represented by \vee
 - For attributes *optional* for a given instance be considered a member of the concept's set

1 Concepts

2 Concepts: Classical Approach

3 Concepts: Family Resemblance

4 Evaluating Concept Definitions

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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- Specify a set of “constitutive dimensions” that *are* the concept
 - Fundamental characteristics of the concept
 - Not causes or effects
 - Not measures of the concept
- Dimensions are *individually necessary* and *jointly sufficient* for a case to be a member of the concept set

Dahl's Definition of Democracy

- Two dimensions

- Both necessary and jointly sufficient

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 - Liberalization (Public contestation)
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- Two dimensions
 - Liberalization (Public contestation)
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- Both necessary and jointly sufficient
- Without liberalization: “inclusive hegemony”
- Without inclusiveness: “competitive oligarchy”

Questions?

Define the concept of “chair”



Image Source: Wikimedia by User:Dori

- 1 Concepts
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Family Resemblance

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

Family Resemblance

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

Complex Boolean Logic

- Jointly necessary and sufficient:
Rule of Law \wedge Equality

Complex Boolean Logic

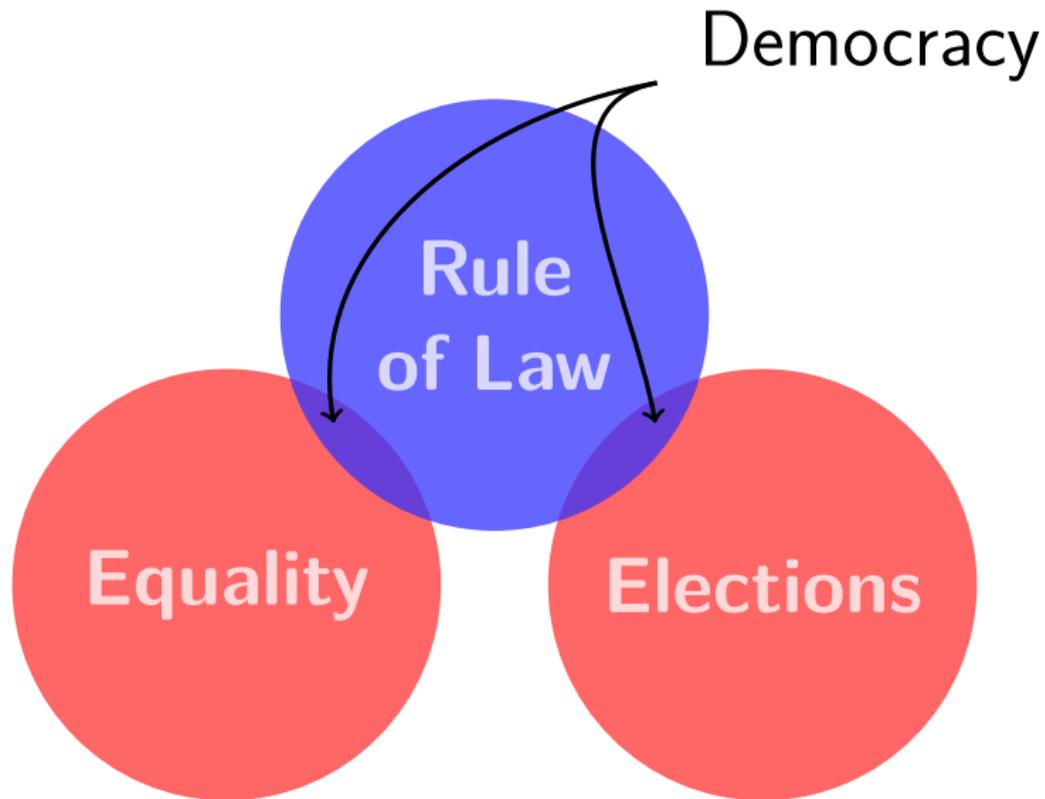
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Rule of Law \wedge (Equality \vee Elections)

Complex Boolean Logic

- Jointly necessary and sufficient:
Rule of Law \wedge Equality
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Rule of Law \wedge (Equality \vee Elections)
- Simple family resemblance logic:
(Equality \vee Elections)

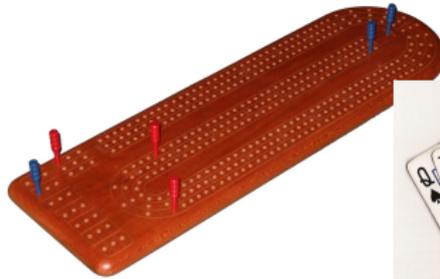
Complex Boolean Logic

- 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)



Questions?

Example: Define “game”



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- 4 Evaluating Concept Definitions**

Other Approaches

- Two most common ways to think about concepts
 - Classical approach (emph. necessity)
 - Family resemblance (emph. sufficiency)
- These are useful when defining *things*

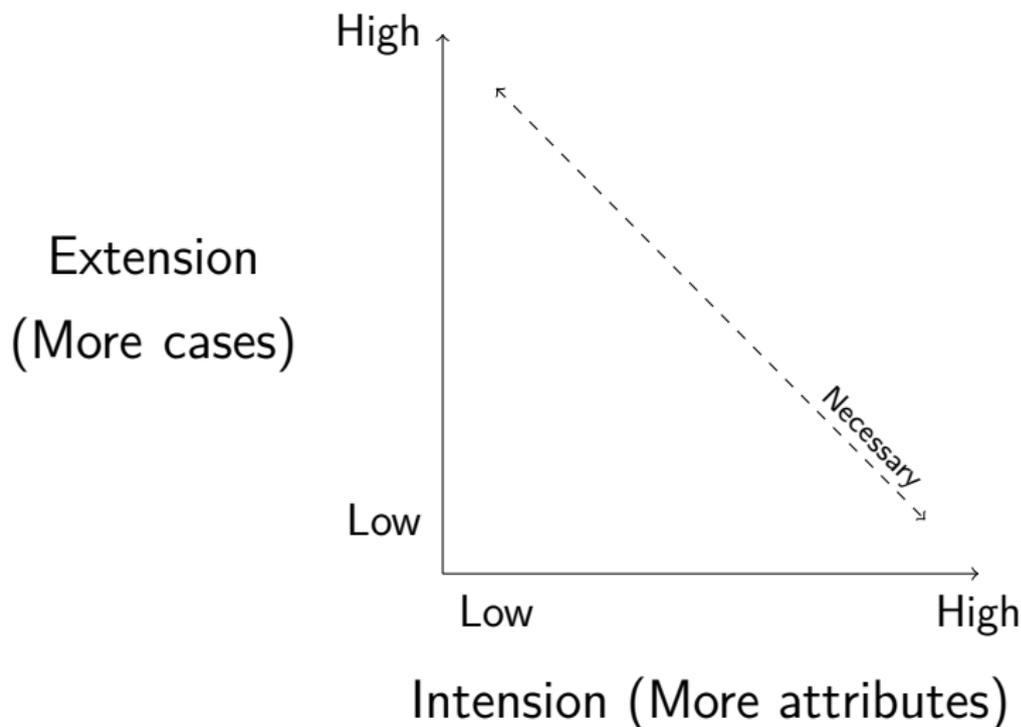
Other Approaches

- Two most common ways to think about concepts
 - Classical approach (emph. necessity)
 - Family resemblance (emph. sufficiency)
- These are useful when defining *things*
- Other approaches might be useful when defining *processes*
 - Mansbridge's definitions of *representation*
 - First, Second, and Third *faces of power*
 - In LT: notions of causality

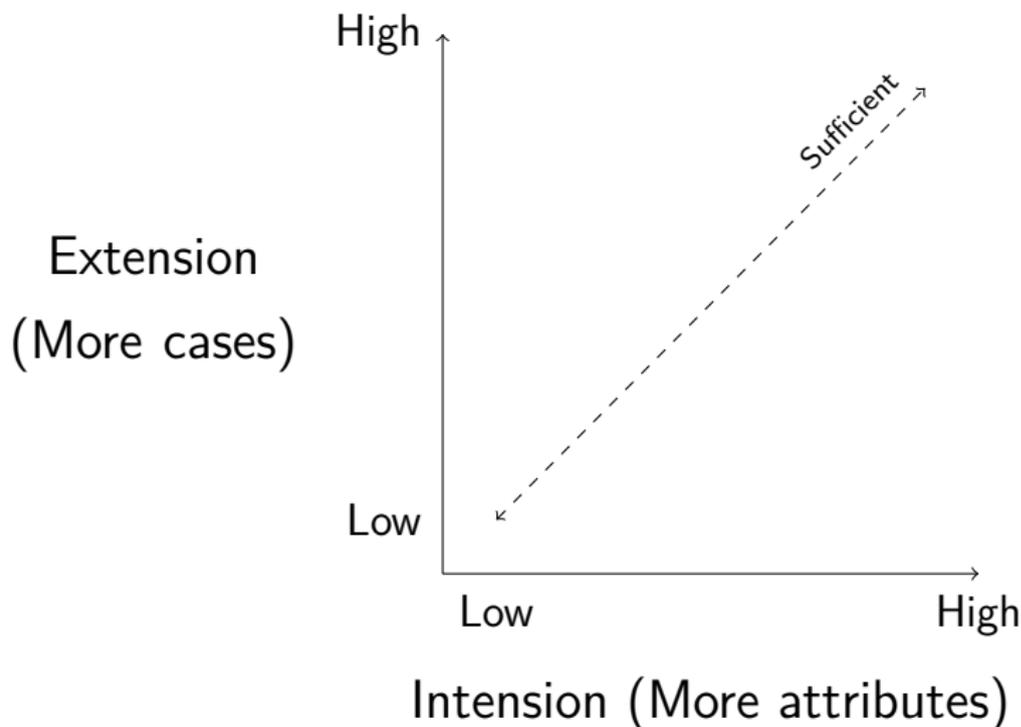
Trade-offs in Definitions



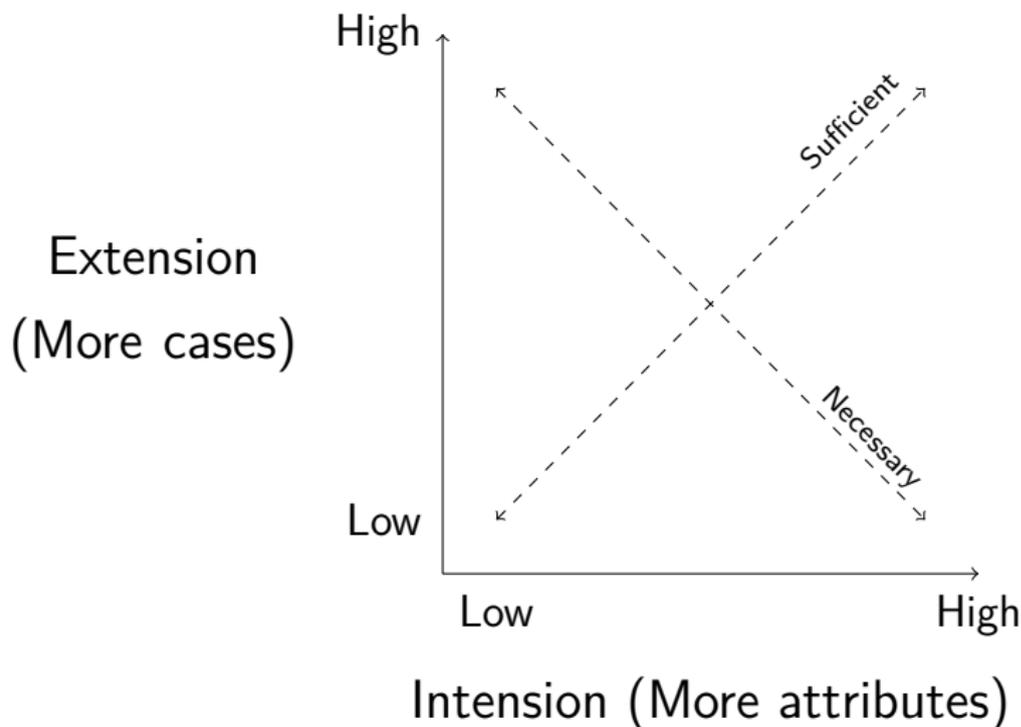
Trade-offs in Definitions



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Trade-offs in Definitions



Gerring's Criteria

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

Questions?

In Sum

- We need to know what we're talking about before we can study anything empirically
- Concepts vary in their usefulness and are often contestable
- Many ways to define and evaluate the quality of concepts

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