

# **BSSn4495: Qualitative research methods**

**Causality and causal  
logic**

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# Agenda

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- Types of causal claims
- Causal logics/mechanisms

# Recap: causal questions and claims

- **Why** something happens – or doesn't happen
- The **conditions** under which something happens
- The **effect** of something on something else
- The **process** through which one thing affects another

# Why causal theories?

- **Prediction** requires causal knowledge
- **Prescription** requires causal knowledge
- **Understanding**
  - To make sense of the world is to ask “why”
- **Causal puzzles**
  - Why do political actors often fail to make prescriptively ideal choices?
  - Why do political choices and outcomes vary so widely?

# What is a cause?

- The US invasion of Iraq caused the rise of ISIS.
- Inequality is growing because of tax cuts for the rich.
- Colonialism is responsible for the poverty of many sub-Saharan African nations.

# The cause of WWI?



# Structural causes of WWI

- Ethno-national tensions within Austria-Hungary
- Imperialism: competition for resources
- German militarism and aggressive aims
- Structure of alliances

# Structural causes vs triggers

- In December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian vegetable peddler sets himself ablaze after his cart is confiscated by a policewoman.
- **Oppressive rule** → Bouazizi self-immolation → **Collapse of Tunisian regime**
- Individual actions as part of the causal pathway
  - **Cause** → very specific detail of the pathway through which cause operated → **outcome**



# Structural causes vs triggers

- Triggers are details of how or when exactly an outcome happened.
- But triggers mostly fail to meet the counterfactual definition of a cause.
  - Triggers are substitutable (i.e., when structural cause is present, lots of things could trigger the outcome)

# Which is a triggering event?

- Causes of Global Financial Crisis of 2008
  - A. Inequality
  - B. Weak regulatory structures
  - C. Collapse of Lehman Brothers investment bank
- Causes of England riots of 2011
  - A. Police shooting of an Afro-Caribbean man
  - B. Racial animosity in Britain
  - C. High youth unemployment

# A puzzle

- How can war happen between two states that know each other's capabilities?
  - E.g., USA and USSR during the Cold War
- For war to happen, there needs to be some strategic miscalculation
  - Strategic miscalculation is a “necessary condition” for war

# Necessary condition

- “Condition C must happen for outcome E to emerge.”
- A cause without which an effect cannot occur.
  - A large middle class is a necessary condition for the emergence of democracy.

# Conjunctural causation

- When an effect depends on a combination of causes.
  - War requires BOTH miscalculation and strong offensive capabilities.
  - Revolutions require BOTH deprivation and arbitrary rule.
  - **Conditional effect**: the effect of C on E depends on D (e.g., poverty causes short civil war when ethnic diversity is low)

# Sufficient conditions

- A cause that always produces an effect
  - A fire is sufficient to cause heat.
  - Rare in social sciences, because so much causation is conjunctural

# Multiple causation

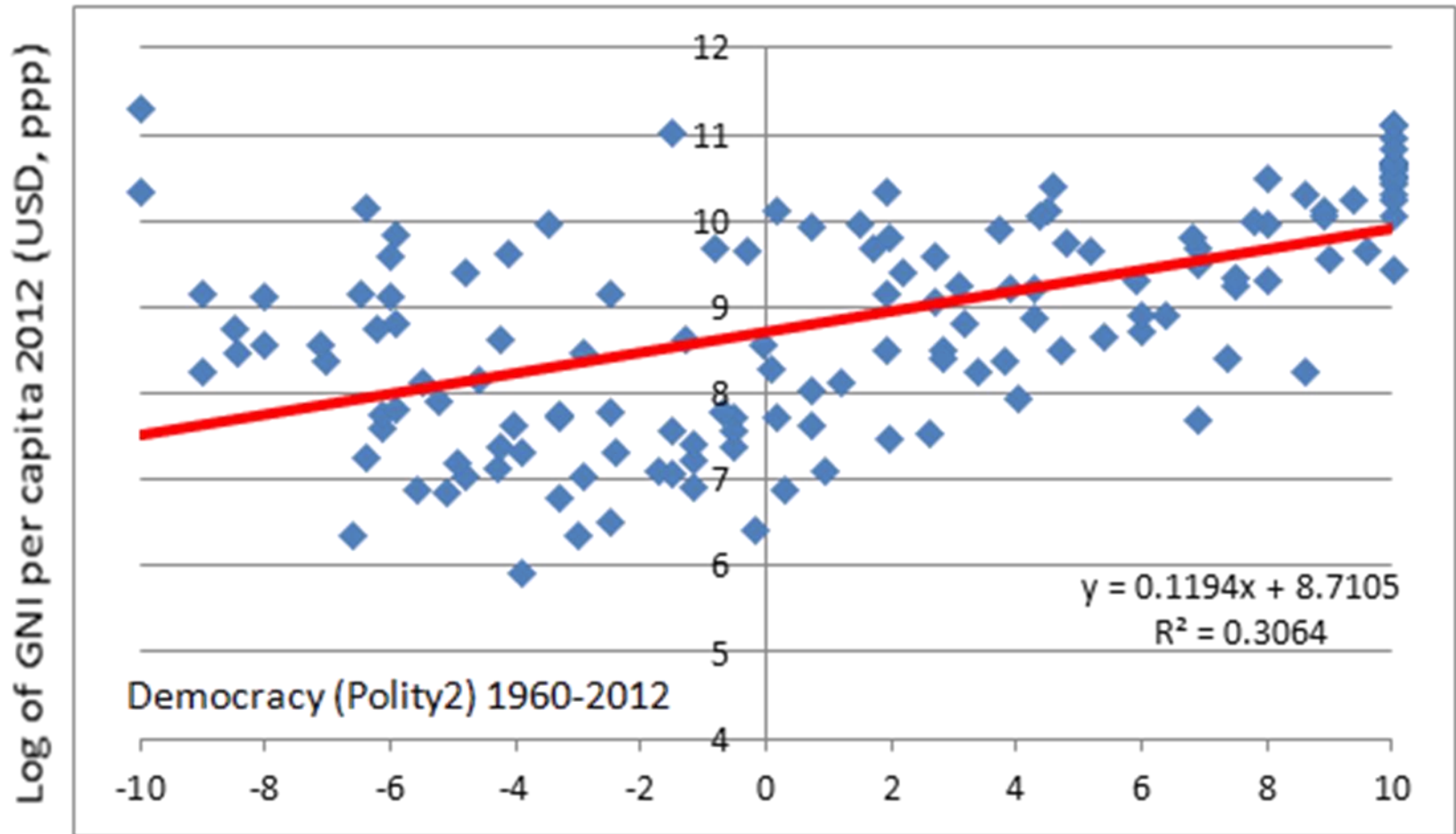
- When there is more than one set of causes that can produce an effect.
  - A can cause E **OR** C can cause E
  - What can cause military leaders to lose power?  
Military defeat **or** economic decline.

# Multiple and conjunctural causation

- A combination of A+B can cause E **OR** a combination of C+D can cause E
- Why do civil wars happen?
  - A combination of ethnic diversity **and** political inequality between groups **OR** a combination of meddling by foreign powers **and** deep ideological polarization



# Democracy and Economic Development



# Causal logic

- Democracy appears to be good for economic development.
  - More democracy → Higher economy growth, more income and wealth per capita, more stability in economic outcomes
- **C causes E**: Democracy leads to economic development.
- But this is not enough to explain **how** or **why** E happens as a result of C.
- **WHY or HOW does democracy lead to economic development?**

# Why Democracy leads to economic development

- More democracy → Peaceful alternations of power and respect for rule of law generate stability → Stability fosters a climate in which people are willing to invest in the economy → Politicians refrain from reneging on democratic commitments that would disrupt investment and the economy to secure re-election → Economic development

# Causal logic

- A causal logic is a set of statements about **how or why a cause produces an effect**.
- A causal logic usually involves a **causal chain** that logically connects the cause C to the effect E

**C → S1 → S2 → S3 → ..... E**

# How to produce causal logic

- 1) Make sure the causal logic starts with the cause, ends with the effect.
- 2) Make sure each step is something that logically causes the step after it.
- 3) A causal logic is not a chronological list of events that happened in a specific place; it's a general logic of how one thing causes another in the world.
- 4) Background assumptions should be treated separately.

# Causal logic: wealth and civil war

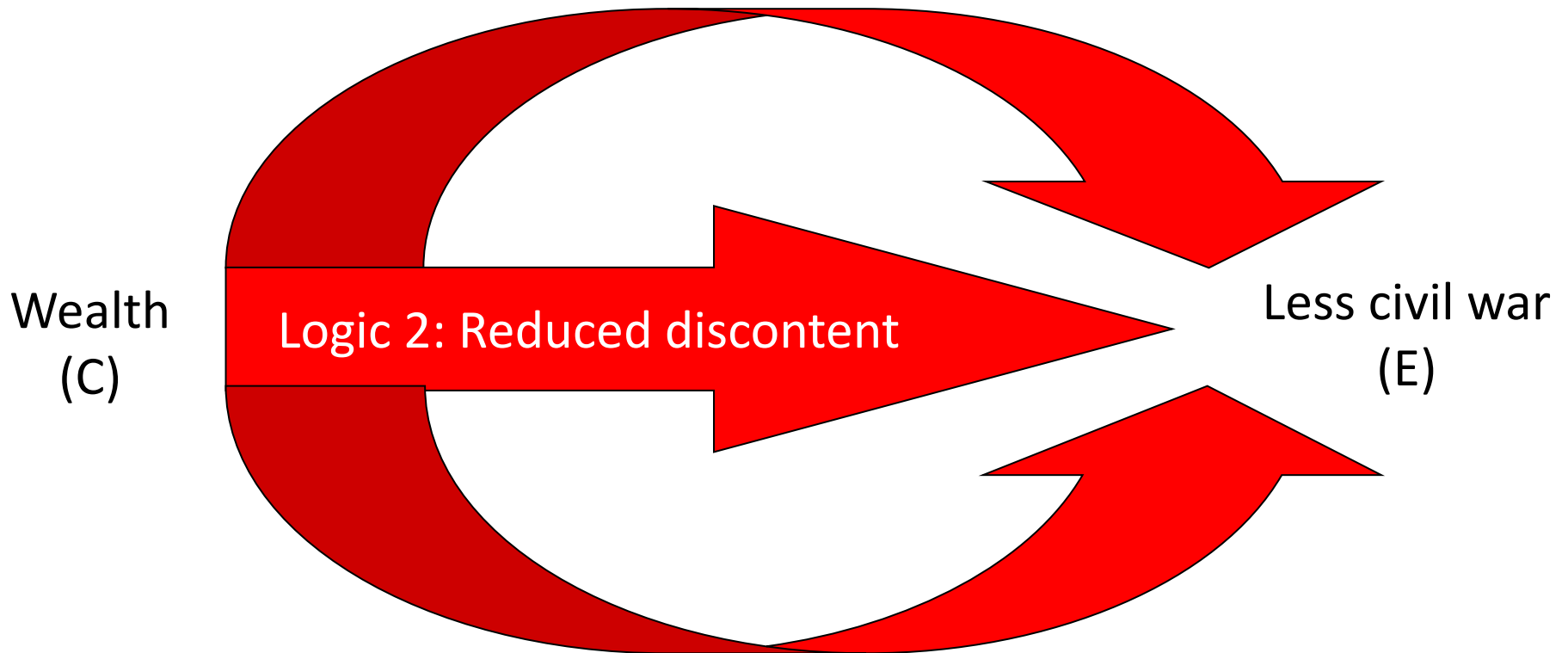
- Causal claim: Greater national wealth (C) reduces likelihood of civil war (E).
- **But why?** How does wealth affect the likelihood of civil war?

# Causal logic: wealth and civil war

- 1) Richer states can spend more on counter-insurgency operations → quick suppression of rebellion
- 2) Wealth reduces discontent → less rebellion
- 3) In richer countries, young men will have better economic alternatives to fighting → rebel groups can't recruit

# Causal logic: wealth and civil war

Logic 1: counter-insurgency capacity



Logic 3: Recruitment problems



# Causal logics: why they matter

- If we know the cause of an effect, why do we care about the causal logic?
- More complete understanding:
  - Tells us about “**side effects**” of a cause in addition to the main effects we are interested in
  - **More evidence** we can gather about a possible causal relationship
  - Helps us address issues, make **policy choices**

# Causal logics: why they matter

- 1) Clarifies side effects, unintended consequences:
  - $C \rightarrow s1 \rightarrow s2 \rightarrow s3 \rightarrow E$
- 2) Helps with prescription
  - Sometimes we can't manipulate C, but we can manipulate s1, s2, etc.
  - E.g., arm governments or fund education

# Causal logics: side effects

Raise taxes on carbon (C)

→ Reduced emissions of greenhouse gases (E)

Raise taxes on carbon (C) → Companies invest in improved energy efficiency → Less energy consumption per unit of output → Reduced emissions of greenhouse gases (E)

Desirable  
Side-Effect

Raise taxes on carbon (C) → Companies reduce employment → Economic output contracts → Reduced emissions of greenhouse gases (E)

Undesirable  
Side-Effect

Questions?

