

PLS 210  
Political Science  
Research Methods

Week 4:

Theories, concepts, variables, hypotheses, and mechanisms

# Recap

- Searching, reading, and writing —>
- The literature—and other sources of inspiration
- Research questions

# Plan for today

- Answering research questions:
  - Theories
  - Concepts
  - Variables
  - Hypotheses
  - Causal mechanisms

# Theories

- Logically connected systems of propositions made up of:
  - Concepts
  - Relations between concepts
- Examples:
  - Tilly's theory of transitions to and reversals from democracy
  - Stephan et al.'s theory of the logic of nonviolent resistance



# Varieties of theory

- Applied theories in empirical Political Science vs. normative Political Theory
- Models vs. theories
- Meta-theories and grand theories vs. mid-range theories



# Uses of theories

- Explanation
- Research agenda-setting
- Direction for data collection
- Accumulation of knowledge



# Features of good theories

- Truthful
- Parsimonious
- General
- Precise





# Concepts and conceptualization

- Concepts
  - Abstract ideas generalized from particular instances
- Features of good concepts:
  - General
  - Informative
  - Accurate
  - Precise
  - Clear—and clearly defined
- Conceptualization:
  - Concept formation





# Concepts and conceptualization: examples

- Tilly: categorical inequality
  - “[O]rganized differences in advantages by gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, community, and similar classification systems”
- Stephan et al.: strategic nonviolent resistance
- Levitsky and Way: competitive authoritarian regimes
  - “In competitive authoritarian regimes, formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority. Incumbents violate those rules so often and to such an extent, however, that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy.”

# Operationalization

- Translation of concepts and their attributes so they can be detected, classified, and measured





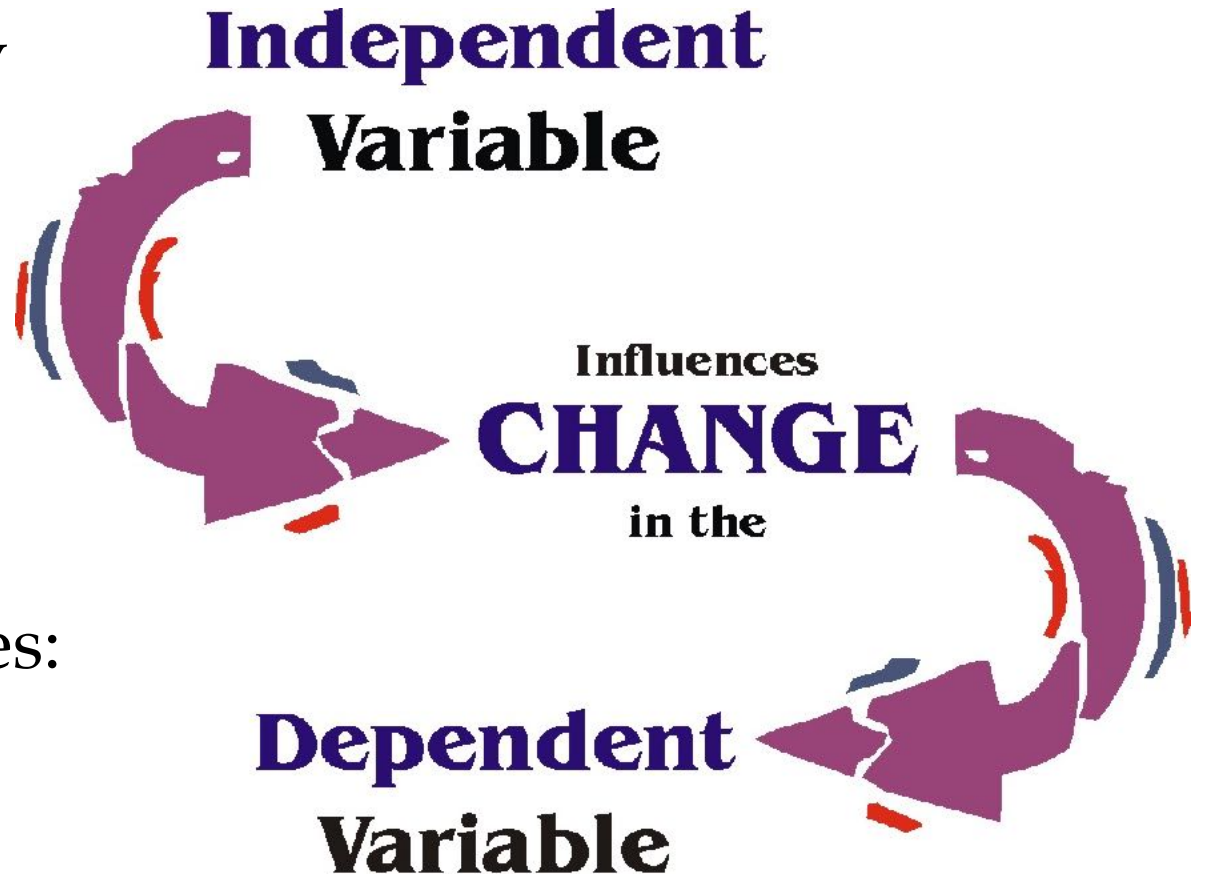
# Conceptual quagmire

- Profusion
- Contestation
- Stretching
- Functional equivalence



# Variables

- Concepts with values that vary or change
- Vs. constants
- Primary types of variables:
  - Independent
  - Dependent
- Relationships between variables:
  - Positive
  - Negative



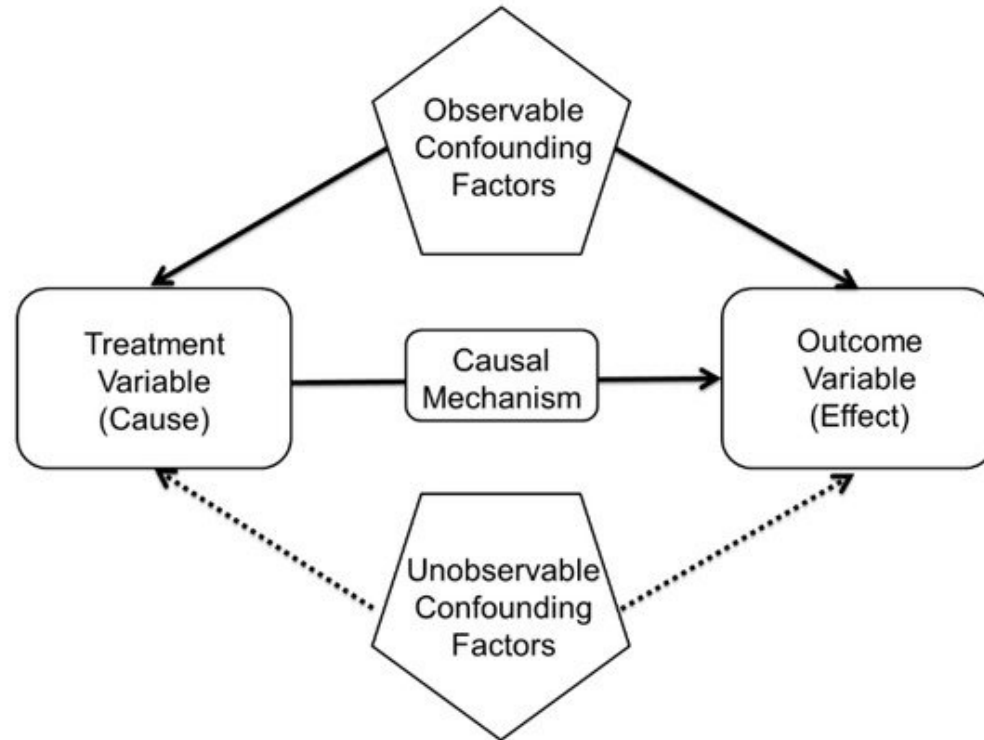
# Hypotheses

- Statements that explain the relationship between the variables of interest
- Features of good hypotheses:
  - Testable
  - Truthful
  - Empirical
  - Plausible
  - General
  - Precise



# Causal mechanisms

- Links between variables that explain causal relationships between them





# Takeaways

- Necessary (but not sufficient) building blocks of Political Science research:
  - Theories
  - Concepts
  - Variables
  - Hypotheses
  - Causal mechanisms

