

CAUSATION¹

A founder of the study of international relations, E. H. Carr, once said: “The study of history is a study of causes.”² Because a basis for thinking about international affairs is history, he could have just as well had said: “The study of international relations is a study of causes.”

The important questions of international policy require an understanding of causation. Even the seemingly normative question of what is our national interest requires consideration of how the intermediate interests are linked to the core interests – can achieving these goals cause results that are in line with the core interests. Then there is the follow-on question of how to achieve those intermediate interests, a mostly objective question that also requires an understanding of causation. In considering how to use the appropriate instruments of power arises, by necessity, the issue of what can cause what. Additionally, if the issue involves morality, then concern with consequences brings us to causation.

If we are, as we are in this course, interested in policy, getting from A to B, where B is a more desirable situation than A, then we must ask how can we cause B. What must we do to get to B? If we are not careful, we will focus only on what we can do and neglect the fact that there are causative factors that are beyond our control and such factors that others can affect. Our concept of power requires us to recognize that power is relative. This means, in the context of causation, that getting to B will require us to consider at least the most critical causative factors.

More broadly, political science is a study of events that are caused by other events. It seeks to explain why events happened so we can better understand how and why they occurred and, perhaps, be able to predict when such an event would occur again. Yet, if political science were more of a science, there would be an effective methodology that would allow us to analyze those events and determine what caused what. We have no such methodology.

The methods we do have are three: careful reasoning, comparative reasoning, and statistical reasoning. International relations are not given to statistical studies; we rarely have a large enough sample for a reliable study. Comparative thinking can help understanding and, in some cases, provide a way to test theories, but it is fundamentally based on careful reasoning. This leaves us with careful reasoning – a process of investigation, consideration, and weighing that can bring us to a deeper understanding, allow us to form reasonable opinions and judgements, and provide us a basis for more effective decisions.

What follows is an introduction to causality from the perspective of political science – the study of why things happen in the political world.

THE BASICS OF CAUSATION

¹ Some of the ideas discussed in this paper were drawn from: 1) Dr. Michael Stanford, “Causation,” *New Perspectives*, Vol 7, No. 1 (www.history_ontheweb.co.uk/concepts/concept71_causation.html and 2) Dr. Jay Fleisher, “Causation” (www.pitt.edu/~super1/lecture/lec7241)

² Stanford, “Causation,” p. 1

In our everyday life we take causation for granted. We know that rain and sunshine will cause plants to grow. They always do, so we think we understand causation. We know that studying will bring better grades. It usually does, so we make the causal tie. We depend upon this understanding to guide our actions and behavior. Every day we see how events and our behavior are followed by and, therefore, seemingly cause effects.

There is a great philosophical debate over causation. One side is summed up in Bertrand Russell's view: "The reason why physics has ceased to look for causes is that, in fact, there are no such things." The other is bound up in the idea that everything is simply the inescapable outcome of what went before, in a direct chain, leading back to the beginning of time. This debate need not concern us. We take neither road, but recognize that finding historical causes is a necessary effort and, although apparently a simple task, it is most often a frustrating task because we can rarely determine causation with very much certainty.

David Lewis, one of modern philosophy's principal thinkers about causation, defines causation by defining the causal chain as a finite sequence of actual events a, b, c, d, . . . where b depends causally on a, c on b, and so on throughout the sequence. Thus, causation occurs when: a is a cause of d, if and only if there exists a causal chain leading from a to d.³

A statement about causation is a predictive hypothesis that says that an outcome cannot be changed without changing the cause. What would or did happen requires that cause.

– To say if A then B is not the equivalent of saying A causes B. If a person has rabies (A) then they were bitten by an animal with rabies (B). Although "if A then B" can imply causality, obviously, rabies does not cause the bite.

– To gather ordinary data and infer a causal relationship is not enough. There is the old image of the rooster causing the sunrise. There is plenty of data, but certainly no causal tie.

– To say that A and B are correlated does not mean that either A or B caused the other. There may be no causal relationship. There may be other factors or both may influence each other. Correlation does not imply causation.

The primary learning point is to be careful about making causative relationships.

The obvious question is then how to be careful. Historians speak of sufficient and necessary causes to help focus on the important factors and events.

– A sufficient cause is one that precedes the event and if it occurs the event will always follow.

– A necessary cause is one that precedes the event and if it did not occur the event would not occur.

Because most historical events are caused by many factors, we can look for those causes that are necessary for the event to occur and for those that are sufficient for the event to occur. The necessary

³ Menzies, Peter, "Counterfactual Theories of Causation", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2001 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2001/entries/causation-counterfactual/>.

causes must have happened, but they did not cause the event. [Japan's war on China in the 1930's was a necessary cause of the U.S.-Japanese War of 1941-45.] They provided the basis for the sufficient cause to cause the event. [The attack on Pearl Harbor was a sufficient cause for that war.] We will rarely find a factor that is both necessary and sufficient. Often we will find situations where we can find necessary factors, but cannot determine the sufficient factor(s). [The Great World Depression is an example.] In some cases, we seem to be able to determine only the sufficient causes, but that is most likely due to our inability to determine with some certainty the preceding necessary factors. [The willingness of the German people to support the extermination policies of their government is an example.] Often we must accept that our analysis leads us to no factors that we can clearly claim as either sufficient or necessary; we just do not know enough. [The basis for the terrorist attacks on American interests is an example.]

The next learning point is to focus our thinking on what we believe might be the necessary and the sufficient causes.

This requires careful reasoning and realization that our data base – history – is not about truth and answers, but depends on debate and questions. It also requires that we seek the more important factors. We must avoid simply accepting a chronological ranking of causes or being unwilling to make the effort at all because there is so much to understand.

AN APPROACH TOWARD ANALYZING CAUSATIVE FACTORS

An approach is to look for deep, intermediate, and precipitating causes.⁴ Deep causes are remote in time and are fundamental to the causative chain. They are necessary causes, such as someone invented of electrical lighting. Immediate causes are more recent in time and are also fundamental to the causative chain. They are necessary causes, such as someone wired the house. Precipitating causes can be either necessary or sufficient, such as someone plugged the lamp into the wall socket (necessary) and someone turned on the switch (sufficient).

Deep causes can also be long term, major, or indirect factors such as climate, economic trends, and basic social factors. Intermediate causes can be factors such as policies, personalities of critical decision makers, or existing social and political attitudes – less indirect and more closely related to the caused event. Precipitating causes are those directly linked to the event. A legal term – proximate cause – can be of some help here. A proximate cause is one that can be fairly and justly determined to be attributed to the acts of the defendant. In the same manner, some precipitating causes are those that can be reasonably directly linked to the event so that they are sufficient causes.

Once we have what we believe to be the causes laid out over time and tentatively sorted out as necessary and sufficient, we need to try to determine if they are really causes. This determination requires us to consider:

- 1) are there reasonable and plausible explanations of cause and effect,
- 2) are the explanations consistent with all or most of the evidence,

⁴ Nye, Joseph, *Understanding International Conflict: An Introduction to Theory and History* (NY: Longman, 2000), p. 70.

- 3) do they seem to fit generally held theories⁵,
- 4) are potential confounding factors⁶ ruled out
- 5) are the causative factors chronological (the necessary causes came before the sufficient causes),
- 6) are there no contending alternative explanations and have you weighed the various opposing views?

If the answers to these questions support the causal hypothesis, we can be generally willing to infer that these caused or will cause the event. Moreover, we have the basis for logical support for our inference.

In the end, we will probably still not be able to pinpoint a set of causes or especially the “causal chain leading from a to d.” There will be multiple causative factors,⁷ some in series and some in parallel. It is not critical to get all the factors in some rank order. Neither is it necessary to account for all the factors, only what we see as the more critical.

What is critical is to determine as many of the more important factors as we can in the time available and to avoid considering as factors those with little or no likelihood of being in reality causes. We want to focus our analysis on what we can logically infer as the possible cause.

Will you be certain of your view? Probably not. Will everyone agree with you? No. But you will have a clearer understanding of what might happen or what did happen.

Early one morning you walk outside of the home where you are visiting and find the front lawn is wet. You think it must have rained last night. As you look around, you see that the neighboring lawns are not wet. Then, off to the side of the yard, you see a hose and sprinkler neatly piled up. You now “know” the cause of the wet grass. Later you ask your host why he gets up so early to water his lawn. He replies, “I don’t. My automatic underground watering system is set to start at 4:00 A.M. ”

⁵ It is best that these theories are from several disciplines or international relations approaches.

⁶ Confounding factors are those that arise from the same event but have different causal ties to the event. An example would be crediting the drop in highway fatalities to a decrease in speed limits when at the same time people were driving less, both factors due to an oil crises that caused oil supplies to be reduced.

⁷ Most historians stress multicausal explanations, recognizing the probable existence of more than one cause of an event. Williams, Robert, The Historian’s Handbook (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), p. 108.

