NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS*

In the social sciences, precise causal relationships are almost never found. That is, we can rarely, if ever, say: If \( A \) (and only \( A \)) then \( B \) (e.g., If employment rises to 20 percent, then the Democratic party will defeat the Republican party). When such a situation exists, however, we can say that \( A \) is both a necessary and sufficient condition for \( B \) (which is the same as saying that we have, in effect, found the one and only cause of \( B \)).

There are many reasons such precise causal relationships are rare in the social world, but a primary one is simply because the social world is characterized by causal complexity, meaning that outcomes are almost never the result of single cause or even single set of causes. This said, the kind of causal situation that has the most relevance for the social scientists is one in which a combination of factors is sufficient for an event. “In this case”, as Alan Isaak points out, “we can call any one of them a partially sufficient condition to indicate that by itself it is not sufficient.” Consider the example of military conflict: “Suppose we discover the [sic] economic rivalry and an arms race are in conjunction sufficient conditions. We can’t say that economic rivalry alone is sufficient; but it is significant when other factors are added. There is evidence to suggest that this is the situation which confronts the political scientist more often than not. With the recognition of the complexity of social phenomena and the acceptance of a research framework which assumes multiple causes, the single sufficient conditions becomes an exotic idea, so exotic that most political scientists push it to the back of their research minds. The political scientist does his scientific work by sorting through a number of possible partially sufficient conditions, rejecting some, accepting others—in other words, by testing hypotheses.”