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Case selection and causal inferences in qualitative comparative research

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Summary: Traditionally, social scientists perceived causality as regularity. As a consequence, qualitative comparative case study research was regarded as unsuitable for drawing causal inferences. Apparently, few cases cannot establish regularity. The dominant perception of causality has changed, however. Nowadays, social scientists define and identify causality through the counterfactual effect of a treatment. This brings causal inference in qualitative comparative research back on the agenda since obviously comparative case studies can identify treatment effects. We argue that the validity of causal inferences from the comparative study of cases depends on the employed case-selection algorithm. We employ Monte Carlo techniques to demonstrate that different case-selection rules strongly differ in their ex ante reliability for making valid causal inferences and identify the most and the least reliable case selection rules.

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