

Political Science 501, Baumgartner  
Short paper topics/discussion points  
Week 11: A Macro Model of the Entire US Political System

Readings: Erikson, MacKuen, Stimson, *The Macro Polity*

Some of the analysis in this book will be above your heads statistically speaking. We can discuss any questions in class. In particular, you'll see they analyze things with a time-series model in which one of the major questions is whether things drift only because of inertia, or are immediately affected by events. The degree of inertia in various series is estimated, and this turns out to vary quite a lot from variable to variable. But those are not the main points that you should focus on; you can read the book later when you've had more statistics training. For now, we'll focus on some more basic points as follows, especially relating to theory, data collection, and measurement.

Read this book, as all the substantive readings for this semester, with a focus on how they did the research. Think separately about the various elements below:

1. What do you think of the overall model? Does the theoretical perspective make sense? In particular, would one expect a "thermostat" model to function effectively? If evidence were consistent with a "thermostat" model, would that have positive or negative normative implications? In sum, is their empirical model a good representation of what one might want to know, in normative terms?

2. Let's look at the measures one-by-one. How did they measure the following:

Presidential Approval

Partisan attachment and "macro-partisanship"

The Public Mood

Estimating how public opinion changes, or partisanship develops, by age-cohorts

Policy Change

Lawmaking

3. Finally, let's look at their last chapter, in which they do computer simulations to present "what-if" scenarios. How convincing do you find this type of analysis? Is it a wave of the future? If you change one parameter – say specify that Carter had won reelection in 1980 – would you expect that to affect other parameters? If so, then you'd need to do as they do and run these simulations. Is this similar to an economic model, for example, forecasting what would economic growth look like 5 years out if we changed interest rates? That would affect other variables in the model, so the true effect would have to be the combined effects of all the direct and also indirect changes, cumulated. So, let's consider how this modeling strategy applies to politics as they do it.