

POLS 541
Fall 2006
Prof. Baumgartner

Questions for Week 12 Nov 23

Readings: various articles and papers on power-law applications and findings

1. The multi-author study on budgets shows that government budgets seem universally to be power-laws. However, the Politics of Attention made clear that budgets are the most punctuated of all the government processes investigated. Why are budgets, but not other decision-making processes, power-laws? What processes do you think could explain the greater extreme value finding in the case of budgets as compared to other distributions?
2. The 3 country study lays out the “increasing institutional friction” hypothesis and tests it in 3 countries, mostly replicating what was found in the US. But some processes prove to be “out of order.” In fact, there may be two reasons for high kurtosis: institutional friction is one, and social cascading is the other. How can one determine where social cascades might be important elements of the decision-making process?
3. Two articles from economics deal with the “superstar” phenomenon. Describe what that is and the explanation of where that comes from. Compare the explanation given of that process with other power-law theories.
4. Gabaix discusses the growth of cities. Compare the logic of the model there with those developed elsewhere.
5. Roberts and Turcotte talk about battle deaths in wars. Compare their logic to what others have written about other power-law findings.
6. Farber writes about citations of US Supreme Court decisions, again finding a power law distribution. What is the logic?
7. Christensen et al. review something completely different: earthquakes. In fact, this is one of the original findings leading to power-law investigations more broadly. Other physical examples you have read about include avalanches and forest fires. Considering there are no people involved and therefore cognitive limits are not part of the picture, and social cascades can’t happen where there is no social structure, what is the relevance of these physical processes for the study of those social processes we are more interested in?