Political Science 501, Baumgartner
Short paper topics/discussion points
Week 10: Cross-Level Inferences, Ecological Fallacy Problems

Readings: Naroll, Robinson, King, Achen and Shively

The readings this week include Naroll on problems of inference in comparative politics, and a series of articles including a classic on ecological fallacy and cross-level inference. The more recent articles are more optimistic about how to do valid work across levels of analysis from the individual to the group, and vice-versa.

Considering Naroll, is the diffusion of traits or characteristics, or simple mimicking, likely to be a problem in comparative politics? That is, is it common for statistically clear relationships to exist that have no causal features; they are simply historical flukes or coincidences? Give some political science examples and explore how the researcher would take steps to avoid it.

Considering Robinson and King together, what is the problem with making inferences about individuals from studies of aggregates? Describe the problem as clearly as possible. Come to class ready to give an example. Note the differences between distributions of data where ecological fallacies would be serious problems and those where one would not be mislead.

Considering Robinson and King together again, what would be the solutions to this problem? How can a person doing analysis of aggregated data know whether they are liable to be making errors? Can you define a range of possible outcomes?

Considering Achen and Shively, explain their approach to the problem. Is there a problem with 'individualism' in social science research? Can one make an 'individualistic fallacy' just as one can make an 'ecological fallacy'? Discuss their proposals and solutions to the issue of aggregation.