

The United States Congress

Political Science 128, Section 1001

Spring 2008, TTh 11-12:15

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“The only difference between death and taxes is that death doesn't get worse every time Congress meets.”- Will Rogers

“Any one of the strange laws we suffer is a compromise between a fad and a vested interest.” - Gilbert Keith Chesterton

“The electors see their representative not only as a legislator for the state but also as the natural protector of local interests in the legislature; indeed, they almost seem to think that he has a power of attorney to represent each constituent, and they trust him to be as eager in their private interests as in those of the country.” - Alexis de Tocqueville

“Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.” - Edmund Burke

Description:

The purpose of this course is to develop an understanding of the United States Congress by examining the rules and incentives that influence individual member behavior as well as shape the procedures by which Congress pursues its primary objective: passing legislation.

The course proceeds in six units. First, we will address the basic questions. What is a legislature? What kinds of behavior and results do we expect from a legislature? What did the Framers of the U.S. Constitution have in mind when they envisioned the bicameral legislature?

In the second unit, we will look at the role of Congress as a representative institution, addressing the electoral incentives and pressures faced by individual members, with an eye toward how these circumstances may have changed over time and how they influence law-making behavior.

Unit Three will cover the institutional rules and procedures that govern the law-making process. How is legislation introduced? What happens in committees and sub-committees? How do these procedures vary between the two Houses of Congress?

Unit Four covers parties, policy-making, and legislative behavior. While the role of political parties will come into play throughout the course, this section will focus in on their importance in the organization and functioning of Congress. We will also explore different accounts of legislative behavior, and finally think about the policy outcomes produced by these arrangements.

In Unit Five, we will look at the relationship between Congress and other branches and components of American government, including the president, the courts, interest groups, and the bureaucracy.

The final unit of the course is designated “special topics.” Here our discussion of components and considerations determining behavior and outcomes will culminate in an examination of descriptive representation of women and minority groups, as well as discuss of the role of Congress in budgetary matters.

Throughout these units, several themes will emerge. First, we will seek to understand what representation means in the context of the U.S. Congress. How do Representatives and Senators represent their constituents? What does representation mean and what kinds of representation exist in the world? Second, we will pay attention to the role of parties in the structure and procedures, decision-making, and policy outcomes of Congress and its members. Finally, we will explore the theme of change and continuity in American politics throughout the twentieth century, with an eye toward how change in the larger political context pertains to Congress.

Textbooks

The following textbooks are available at the BookMarq.

Steven S. Smith, Jason M. Roberts, and Ryan J. Vander Wielen, *The American Congress*.

Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, *Congress Reconsidered*.

Requirements and Expectations

This course is designated as “writing intensive.” The focus of the writing component of the course will be on a series of short memos. You will choose a **current** member of Congress to whom you will direct a series of memos throughout the semester. Pretending you are an advisor to this Senator or Representative, you will write four memos applying the material we have covered in class to a problem on which your advice has been sought. You will be given a specific question to address in each memo. On January 28, you will turn in a 1-2 page description of the Representative or Senator you have chosen. The remaining memos are to be no more than 3 pages (double-spaced). The due dates for these assignments are listed on the syllabus. **No late**

work will be accepted. Hard copies should be turned in at the beginning of class on the deadline. Memos should be typed, in a standard font, and pages should be stapled. You will receive prompts outlining what is expected for each memo.

In addition to your written work, you are expected to participate in class. You are expected to attend every class meeting, and be a prepared and active contributor to the discussion. This requires you to complete the assigned reading before class. Participation is an important part of this course, and will account for 10% of your grade in the course.

Academic dishonesty (i.e. cheating and plagiarism) is a violation of university policy and as such will not be tolerated. In written assignments, attribution of ideas that are not your own is of crucial importance. When in doubt, CITE!

Grading

Grades for the course will be determined as follows:

Participation: 10%

Pre-memo: 5%

Memos (4): 10% each

Midterm examination: 20%

Final examination: 25%

Schedule of Important dates:

January 28 - Pre-Memo Due

February 5 - Memo 1 Due

February 26 - Midterm Exam

March 11 - Memo 2 Due

April 10 - Memo 3 Due

May 1- Memo 4 Due

May 5 (1PM) Final Exam

Unit One: Introduction to the Study of Congress, Constitutional Issues

January 15 Introductory meeting

no readings

What does a Congress do? How do we study a legislature?

January 17 - The many motivations of the legislator

Reading: *The American Congress*, chapter 2

January 22 Founding Questions

The role of the legislature in the separation of powers

Reading: Federalist #47, 48, 51, 52, 53, 62-65

Article I of the Constitution

Unit Two: Representation and Electoral Pressures

January 24

Reading: *The American Congress* Chapter 3

Pre-memo due

Prompt for Memo 1 handed out

January 29

Reading: *Congress reconsidered* 135-158

Fenno, *Home Style*, 1-29 (D2L)

January 31

Reading: Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, 13-38 (D2L)

February 5 -

Reading: Mayhew, 38-77 Abramowitz reply (D2L)

Memo 1 Due

Unit Three: Procedures and Policies

Feb 7 - Basic Rules and Procedures

Reading: Chapter 7, *The American Congress*

Feb 12 - Committee System

Reading: Chapter 6, *The American Congress*

Feb 14 - Voting

Reading: Chapter 8, *The American Congress*

Feb 19 - Taking a closer look at Senate procedures

Reading: Sinclair, Barbara. "The New World of U.S. Senators," in *Congress Reconsidered*, 1-20

February 21- - Taking a closer look at House procedures

Reading: Dodd and Oppenheimer, "A Decade of Republican Control, in *Congress Reconsidered*

February 26

Midterm

February 28 - in-class simulation, debate and voting

Memo 2 prompt handed out

No reading

Unit Four: Parties, Policy, and Legislative Behavior

March 4

Reading: Chapter 5, *The American Congress*

March 6

Reading: Smith and Gamm, "The Dynamics of Party Leadership in Congress," in *Congress Reconsidered*

March 11

Reading: Aldrich and Rohde, "Congressional Committees in a Partisan Era," CR

Reading: Fenno, selection from *Congressmen in Committees* (D2L)

Memo #2 due

Spring break

March 25

Reading: Poole and Rosenthal, selection from *Congress* (D2L)

Memo 3 prompt handed out

March 27

Reading: Wolfensberger, "Congressional Policymaking in an Age of Terrorism," CR

Unit Five: Congress and the other Branches

April 1 - Congress and the president

Reading: *The American Congress, Chapter 9*

April 3

Congress and the judicial branch

Reading: *The American Congress, Chapter 10*

Congress Reconsidered, 297-318

April 8

Reading: Congress and bureaucracy

Congress and Its Members- D2L

April 10 -Congress and interest groups

Reading: *TAC*, Chapter 11

Memo #3 due

Unit Six - Special Topics

April 15

Descriptive Representation: women in congress

Readings TBA

Memo 4 prompt handed out

April 17 Descriptive Representation: minority group representation in congress

Readings TBA

April 24- Congress and the budget, 1

Readings TBA

April 29 -Congress and the budget, 2

Readings TBA

May 1 - wrap-up

Memo #4 due