

**PSC 2218: Legislative Politics**  
**Professor Sarah Binder**  
**Spring 2015**

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**Class meets: M, W 9:35 – 10:50 am**  
**Funger 222**  
**Office hours: Mon. 11am -12:30 pm**

**COURSE DESCRIPTION and LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

As registered by Gallup in recent opinion polls, only seven percent of Americans approve of the performance of the U.S. Congress. Recent congresses have been called dysfunctional: disagreements between the parties in the fall of 2013 shut down the government and brought the country to the brink of default on the nation's debt. With the November 2014 elections delivering control of the House and Senate to the Republicans, while the Democrats still hold the White House, few hold out hope that Congress's performance will improve in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress (2015-6). Why are the parties so polarized, and why has lawmaking proved so difficult in recent years? More broadly, this course affords us an opportunity to explore and to explain the electoral and institutional forces that shape the membership of Congress and the institution's capacity to govern.

The electoral context sets the stage for our study of Congress—the oldest popularly elected legislative body in the world and the most powerful one. As a result of completing this course, you should be able to:

1. Recall and explain electoral, institutional, and systemic features of the U.S. Congress.
2. Accurately apply political science concepts (e.g. power, representation) that relate to Congress.
3. Describe, explain, and apply the three basic theories of legislative organization that are commonly applied to the U.S. Congress.
4. Demonstrate the ability to think and write critically about the U.S. Congress, as evidenced in exams, a course paper and a group project.

Theories of politics and political behavior can help us to interpret and explain contemporary politics, so throughout the course we will keep a collective eye on events in Washington and elsewhere related to legislative politics and Congress. We will start each class session with a discussion of relevant news to our study of Congress, so I expect students to come to class prepared to raise interesting stories or questions from the week's news. I highly recommend that you read a daily newspaper (e.g. *Washington Post* or *New York Times*) or that you listen to a news program (such as NPR's *Morning Edition* or *All Things Considered*) or that you at least try to consume news by watching *The Daily Show* or reading BuzzFeed). Although attention to developments on the Hill will enhance the value of this course for you, it is no substitute for careful reading and classroom discussion and attendance.

**REQUIRED READINGS/TEXTS**

The required reading for this course consists of three books and numerous readings posted on Blackboard. All of the texts are available for purchase in the GW Bookstore (and all are paperback versions).

On occasion, I will post additional readings on Blackboard, or I will circulate them by email. These reading assignments will be announced in class or by email. You are responsible for making sure that I

have a working email address for you at the beginning of the semester, and you are responsible for these readings on course exams. (Note: I do not receive any royalties from your purchase of *Stalemate*.)

Steven S. Smith, J. M. Roberts, and R.J. VanderWielen, *The American Congress*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Cambridge 2013  
David Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. Yale University Press. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2004.  
Sarah Binder, *Stalemate: Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock* Brookings 2003.

## **GRADED ASSIGNMENTS and CLASS POLICIES**

Your grade in this course will be based on a midterm exam (20%), a group project (10%), a 6-8 page paper (30%) and a final exam (40%). It is not possible to submit extra assignments in an effort to raise your grade, unless I have specified in advance to the entire class that such an opportunity exists. To achieve a passing grade in the course, you must complete and hand in each of the assignments. You are responsible for keeping a hard copy back-up of your paper. Political science majors must receive a grade of C- or better in order to count the course towards their required credit hours in the major.

I will distribute a study guide one week before each exam. The exams will include material covered in the assigned readings and in the lectures. Since the lecture material will not necessarily appear in the readings, missing class will put you at a disadvantage. And since I do not discuss all of the readings in class, skipping reading assignments will also put you at a disadvantage. A paper assignment will be distributed around the time of the midterm.

## **IMPORTANT DATES**

Exams and papers are tentatively scheduled as follows. Any changes will be announced in class. You are responsible for being aware of any changes.

Midterm exam: Wed., February 25, 2014

Group project: Mon., April 6, 2014

Paper due: Wed. April 29<sup>th</sup> (in class)

Final exam: TBA when the Registrar posts the final exam schedule

Note: In accord with university policy, the final exam will be given on the designated final exam day/time for this course and not during the last week of the semester.

## **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

I personally support the GW Code of Academic Integrity. It states: “Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one’s own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information.” For the remainder of the code, see: <http://www.gwu.edu/~ntegrity/code.html>.

## **SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM**

Disability Support Services (DSS): Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential of a disability should contact the Disability Support Services office at (202) 994-8250 in the Marvin Center, Suite 242, to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information please refer to: <http://gwired.gwu.edu/dss/>

University Counseling Center (UCC): The UCC offers 24/7 assistance and referral to address students' personal, social, career, and study skills problems. Services for students include: crisis and emergency mental health consultations and confidential assessment, counseling services, and referrals. See <http://gwired.gwu.edu/counsel/CounselingServices/AcademicSupportServices>. Or call (202) 994-5300.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

The course schedule outlines the topics we will cover in class and the reading assignments for each topic. This is a tentative schedule intended to give you an overview of the course. I will at times get ahead or behind the printed schedule. Thus, you may want to adjust your reading schedule accordingly. I reserve the right to make changes to the syllabus as the semester progresses. You are responsible for any of the changes to the assigned readings. All of the articles on the syllabus are available on-line via the course page on Blackboard (<http://blackboard.gwu.edu>) (and are marked BB below). Once logged onto the course page on Blackboard, follow the links to "Syllabus," and you will see separate links for each of the articles. If you have any trouble accessing any of the on-line pieces, please let me know as soon as possible.

### **January 12**

#### **Introduction**

Smith et. al., Chapter 1

Dodd and Oppenheimer, "The House in a Time of Crisis," *Congress Reconsidered* 2013 (BB)

Packer, [The Empty Chamber: Just How Broken is the Senate?](#) *New Yorker*, August 9, 2010 (BB)

Warren, ["Help, We're in a Living Hell and Don't Know How to Get Out,"](#) *Esquire*, Oct. 15, 2014

Raju, Manu, ["McConnell Meets Senate,"](#) *Politico*, January 6, 2015 (BB)

Peters, Jeremy, ["Boehner Fends off Dissent as G.O.P. takes the reins,"](#) *NYT* Jan 6, 2015 (BB)

Binder, ["Deal-making in a polarized Congress,"](#) *The Washington Post*, Oct. 16, 2013 (BB)

### **January 14, 21 (no class Jan. 19)**

#### **Congress and the Constitution**

Smith et. al. Chapter 2 (pp. 25-40)

Toobin, ["Our Broken Constitution,"](#) *The New Yorker*, Dec. 9, 2013 (BB)

### **January 26, 28**

#### **Origins and development of Congress**

Smith et. al., Chapter 2 (pp. 40-50)

Binder, *Stalemate*, Chapters 1-2

### **February 2, 4, 9, 11, 18, 23 (no class Feb. 16)**

#### **Congressional elections**

Smith et. al. Chapter 3

Jacobson, ["Partisanship, Money, and Competition,"](#) *Congress Reconsidered* 2013 (BB)

Toobin, ["Drawing the Line,"](#) *The New Yorker*, March 6, 2006 (BB)

McCarty, "The Limits of Electoral and Legislative Reform..." *CA Law Review* 2011 (BB)

Cohn, ["Quit Blaming Gerrymandering for the Shutdown,"](#) *New Republic*, Oct. 3, 2013 (BB)

Abramowitz et. al., "Don't Blame Redistricting for Uncompetitive Elections," *PS* (2006) (BB)

Jacobson, "How the Economy and Partisanship Shaped the 2012 Presidential and

Congressional Elections, *PSQ* Spring 2013 (BB)  
McGhee, Nyhan, and Sides, "[Midterm Postmortem.](#)" *The Boston Review*, Nov 2010 (BB)  
Ansolabehere, Steven, "[Unsafe Seats.](#)" *The Boston Review*, Jan/Feb 2011 (BB)  
Arbour, Brian, "'All Politics is Local'? Not anymore" [The MonkeyCage](#) Dec 9, 2014 (BB)  
Enten & Mehta, "[The Election Map Alone Doesn't Explain the 2014 Republican Wave.](#)" 538

## **February 25**

**Midterm exam in class (slight chance it gets pushed back to March 2<sup>nd</sup>)**

## **March 2**

Film: "[Can Mr. Smith Get to Washington Anymore?](#)"

*After* watching film, read [Department of Justice Press Release](#) (BB) and [this](#)

## **March 4**

**Representation: The electoral connection**

Smith et. al., Chapter 4

Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, Part 1

## **March 16, 18, 23**

**Congressional committees**

Smith et. al, Chapter 6

Aldrich, Perry, and Rohde, "Richard Fenno's Theory of Congressional Committees and the Partisan Polarization of the House," *Congress Reconsidered* (2013) BB

Mayhew, *Congress*, Part 2

## **March 25, 30, April 1**

**Leaders and parties in Congress**

Smith et. al., Chapter 5

Koger, "Filibustering and Parties in the Modern Senate," *Congress Reconsidered* (2013) (BB)

Draper, "[How Kevin McCarthy Wrangles the Tea Party in Washington](#)" *NYT*, July 13, 2011 (BB)

## **April 6**

**Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock**

Binder, *Stalemate*, Chapters 3-4, 6

Binder, *Polarized We Govern*, Brookings Institution 2014 (BB).

## **April 8, 13, 15, 20**

**"Unorthodox lawmaking"**

Smith et. al, Chapters 7-8

Binder, "[Oh 113<sup>th</sup> Congress Hastert Rule, We Hardly Knew Ye.](#)" *The Monkey Cage*, Jan.16, 2013

Taibbi, "[Four Amendments & a Funeral.](#)" *Rolling Stone*, August 10, 2005 (BB)

Smith, "[The Senate Syndrome](#)" *Issues in Governance Studies*, Brookings Institution June 2010 (BB)

Ryan Lizza, "[Getting to Maybe.](#)" *New Yorker*, June 24, 2013 (BB)

**April 22, 27, 29 (designated Monday)**

**Making public policy: Congress, the president, and the Courts**

Smith et. al., Chapters 9-12

Binder and Maltzman, "Advice and Consent," *Congress Reconsidered* (2013) (BB)

Bettelheim, "The Senate Goes Nuclear," *CQ Weekly*, Dec. 2, 2013 (BB)

Howell and Pevehouse, "When Congress Stops Wars," *Foreign Affairs* 2007 (BB)

Feldman, "[The Law and the War on Terror: Where We Are Now](#)" *Carnegie Reporter* 2007 (BB)

CFR, *Judging Guantanamo: The Court, Congress, and the White House* 2009 (BB)

Klein, "[The Unpersuaded](#)" *New Yorker*, March 19, 2012 (BB)

The Economist, "[Hello, Deadlock](#)," June 27, 2014 (BB)