

PSC 2218W: Legislative Politics
Spring 2017
Professor Sarah Binder

MW 9:35-10:50 am, MPA 305

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COURSE DESCRIPTION and LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As registered by Gallup in recent opinion polls, only thirteen percent of Americans approve of the performance of the U.S. Congress. Critics call recent Congresses dysfunctional: disagreements between polarized parties in the fall of 2013 shut down the government and brought the country to the brink of default on the nation's debt. Although Congress was remarkably productive at the end of 2015, Congress accomplished relatively little in 2016 as the presidential election loomed. With the arrival of unified Republican control and President Trump, our eyes this semester will be on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue: How successful will Republicans be in advancing their agenda and what role will Democrats play as the opposition party? In this course, we will explore and analyze electoral and institutional forces that shape congressional elections and that drive the capacity of Congress and the president to solve major public problems.

The electoral context sets the stage for our study of Congress—the oldest popularly elected legislature in the world and the most powerful one. After completing this writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) 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 and theories that relate to the U.S. Congress.
3. Demonstrate the ability to think critically about the U.S. Congress, as evidenced by performance on exams and writing assignments.
4. Demonstrate conventions of writing in the discipline of political science.
5. Apply critical analytical thinking to your writing through drafting and revising, as well as through peer review of your classmates' writing.

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 consists of two books and numerous readings posted on Blackboard. Both books are available (in paperback) for purchase in the GW Bookstore. 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.

1. Davidson, Oleszek, Lee, and Schickler, *Congress and Its Members*, 15th edition, CQ Press.
2. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, 2nd edition, Yale University Press. 2004.

Note: This is a 3-credit, lecture-based course. Federal regulations for 3-credit courses include 2.5 hours/week of direct instruction (in-class) and 5 hours/week of independent learning (out of class).

GRADED ASSIGNMENTS and CLASS POLICIES

Your grade in this course will be based on the assignments listed below. To achieve a passing grade in the course, you must complete and hand in each of the assignments. It is not possible to submit extra assignments to raise one's grade. You are responsible for keeping a hard copy backup of any written assignments. 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. For writing assignments, I will subtract one point each day for any missed deadline (unless I agree to a new deadline before the due date).

Note: I do not take attendance in class. However, there will be 5 very short "pop" writing assignments at the start of class throughout the semester, worth one point each. Also, students who attend class regularly (and do the reading) will get more out of the course and will have a better chance of doing well on the assignments. So, come to class!

Assignments:

- 20% Midterm exam
- 30% Final exam
- 5% "Pop" writing assignments (5 per semester)
- 45% Research paper

Your research paper grade will be determined as follows:

- 5% Proposal
- 10% Rough draft
- 5% Participation in peer review of rough draft
- 25% Final draft

I will distribute the paper assignment early during the semester (as well as grading rubrics for the steps of the research paper). I will also 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.

IMPORTANT DATES

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

Paper proposal: Wednesday, February 8, 2017
Midterm exam: Wednesday, February 22, 2017
Rough draft due: Wednesday, April 5, 2017
Peer review workshop: Wednesday, April 26, 2017
Paper due: Wednesday, May 3 (designated Monday 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: <https://studentconduct.gwu.edu/>.

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 Rome Hall, Suite 102, to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information please refer to: <http://disabilitysupport.gwu.edu/>

Mental Health Services: The University’s Mental Health Services 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://counselingcenter.gwu.edu>. Or call (202) 994-5300.

UNIVERSITY POLICY ON RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

1. Students should notify faculty during the first week of the semester of their intention to be absent from class on their day(s) of religious observance.

2. Faculty should extend to these students the courtesy of absence without penalty on such occasions, including permission to make up examinations.
3. Faculty who intend to observe a religious holiday should arrange at the beginning of the semester to reschedule missed classes or to make other provisions for their course-related activities

COURSE SCHEDULE

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

January 18 Introduction

Davidson et al, Chapter 1

Dodd and Oppenheimer, "Congress in the Age of Trump," *Congress Reconsidered* 2017

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

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

Edwards, ["Can Donald Trump Persuade Americans to Support His Agenda?"](#) Dec. 2016

Costa and Rucker, "Trump said he'd do a lot – fast," *Washington Post*, January 14, 2017

Texas A&M Writing Center, ["Clear and Concise Writing."](#) This is a great handout on easy ways to improve your writing.

January 23, 25 Origins and development of Congress

Davidson et al, Chapter 2 (pp 15-39)

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

January 30, February 1, 6 Congressional elections (1)

Davidson et al, Chapter 3

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

Gonzales, ["Political Battles Still Dog Redistricting in California,"](#) NPR, May 29, 2013

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

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

Abramowitz et. al., “Don’t Blame Redistricting for Uncompetitive Elections,” *PS* (2006)
Toobin, [“Do we still need the Voting Rights Act?”](#) *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2012
Toobin, “Holder v. Roberts,” *The New Yorker*, February 17, 2014

February 8, 13, 15
Congressional elections (2)

Paper proposal due Feb 8

Davidson et al, Chapter 4
Jacobson, “Polarization, Gridlock, and Presidential Campaign Politics in 2016,” *AAPSA*,
Sept. 2016.
McGhee, Nyhan, and Sides, [“Midterm Postmortem.”](#) *The Boston Review*, Nov 2010
Ansolabehere, Steven, [“Unsafe Seats.”](#) *The Boston Review*, Jan/Feb 2011
Arbour, Brian, “All Politics is Local? Not anymore,” [The Monkey Cage](#), Dec. 9, 2014
Enten, [“There were no purple* states on Tuesday.”](#) Fivethirtyeight.

February 22

Midterm exam in class

February 27

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

After watching film, read [Department of Justice Press Release](#) and [“Disgraced ex-senator...”](#)

March 1

Representation: The electoral connection

Davidson et al, Chapters 5 and 16
Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, Part 1

March 6, 8, 20 (no class March 13, 15, spring break)
Congressional committees

Davidson et al, Chapter 7
Mayhew, *Congress*, Part 2
Aldrich, Perry, and Rohde, “Richard Fenno’s Theory of Congressional Committees and the Partisan Polarization of the House,” *Congress Reconsidered* (2013)

March 22

Politics of deadlock and dealmaking

Binder, “[Legislating in Polarized Times](#),” *Congress Reconsidered* (2017)

Binder and Lee, “[Making Deals in Congress](#),” APSA Task Force (2013)

Lizza, “[Getting to Maybe](#),” *New Yorker*, June 24, 2013

March 27, 29, April 3

Leaders and parties in Congress

Davidson et al, Chapter 6

Lizza, “A House Divided,” *New Yorker*, December 14, 2015

Koger, “Filibusters and Majority Rule in the Modern Senate,” *Congress Reconsidered* (2017)

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

Swers, “Gender and Party Politics in a Polarized Era,” in Straus and Glassman 2017

April 5, 10, 12, 17

“Unorthodox lawmaking”

Rough draft due April 5

Davidson et al, Chapters 8-9

Taibbi, “[Four Amendments & a Funeral](#),” *Rolling Stone*, August 10, 2005

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

Grunwald, “[The Victory of ‘No’](#),” *Politico Magazine*, December 2016

April 26

Peer review workshop for paper drafts

April 24, 26, May 1

Making public policy: Congress, the president, and the courts

Davidson, Chapters 10-12, 14-15

Binder and Maltzman, “Is Advice and Consent Broken?” *Congress Reconsidered* (2017)

Rosen, “[The Overinflated Presidency](#),” *WSJ* December 2016

Klein, “[The Unpersuaded](#)” *New Yorker*, March 19, 2012

Kriner, “Congress, Public Opinion and the Political Costs of Waging War,” (2017)

Steinhauer, “[A Congress That Doesn’t Want to Weigh In on War](#),” *NYT*, Dec. 9, 2015

May 3 “Designated Monday”

Papers due, catch up class if needed