

**PSC 2218W
Legislative Politics
Spring 2023**

**MW 9:35-10:50 am
Bell 109**

Professor Sarah Binder
Office (Binder): Monroe 467
Email: binder@gwu.edu
Office hours: Mondays 11am-12:30 pm

Writing TA: Sean Givnish
Office (Givnish): Monroe 451
Email: sgivnish@gwmail.gwu.edu
Office hours: Tues 10-11:30 am, or by [Zoom](#)

COURSE DESCRIPTION and LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As our semester begins, the U.S. Congress has just concluded a remarkably productive two years, especially surprising given polarized and near-parity parties, internal party divisions, limited organizational resources, a nationally unpopular president, a generational high in inflation, and a former president whose influence permeates the House and Senate Republican Conferences. The new 118th Congress seems unlikely to be as productive as the last one. It took 15 ballots, the most since the Civil War, for Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) to sew up the Speakership after agreeing to his GOP colleagues' procedural and policy demands. Looming ahead is the question that will occupy Washington -- and us-- this semester: How will Congress get the important stuff done? We will approach this question by examining electoral and institutional forces that shape the dynamics of congressional elections and affect Congress's political will and legislative capacity to solve 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. Analyze and write critically about electoral and institutional features of the U.S. Congress.
2. Apply political science concepts and theories to the study of the U.S. Congress.
3. Demonstrate conventions of writing in the discipline of political science.
4. Communicate critical and analytical thinking through drafting and revising written work, as well as through peer review of classmates' writing.

Political science theories 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 news that is relevant to our study of Congress, so I expect you to come to class prepared to raise stories or questions from the week's news. I highly recommend that you read a daily newspaper, subscribe to a Congressional newsletter (a few suggestions listed below), or listen to a news podcast (such as the *NYT's The Daily*, several produced by *CQ Roll Call* or others). Attention to developments on the Hill will enhance the value of this course for you. But it is no substitute for careful reading, classroom discussion, and attendance.

REQUIRED MATERIALS

The required reading consists of two books and numerous readings posted on Blackboard. Both books will be available (in paperback or e-versions) for purchase or rent via the GW Bookstore (or elsewhere). I highly recommend that you purchase or rent the assigned 18th edition; relying on the 17th edition will put you at a disadvantage. 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.

1. Davidson, Oleszek, Lee, Schickler, and Curry: *Congress and Its Members*, 18th edition, CQ Press. 2021
2. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, 2nd edition, Yale University Press. 2004.

I recommend that you consider subscribing to a morning newsletter or a “Substack” on Congress. You are encouraged but not *required* to do so. These are good sources of relevant news stories to raise during our daily legislative news chinwag at the start of each class. There are many (free or paid) options out there, but I like these in particular:

- [Punchbowl News](#). The AM newsletter is free.
- [Regular Order](#) (Jamie Dupree). Monthly \$8 subscription.
- [Steve’s Notes on Congressional Politics](#) (Steven Smith, WashU). Free and excellent.

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 (including all the graded components leading up to the final paper drafts). ***It is not possible to submit extra assignments to raise your grade (unless I have offered that opportunity to every student in the course).*** 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. Because the writing assignments cumulate over the semester into two different paper assignments, you will perform better in the course if you meet each of the deadlines for submitting written assignments. I reserve the right to announce and apply a penalty for missing deadlines, but I hope not to have to do so. (Penalty would be announced before the due date.) FYI: I store grades in an off-line Excel file, rather than on Blackboard.

Note: I do not take attendance in class. However, I will give six “pop” writing assignments during class throughout the semester. 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.

Assignments (100 points total, 102 points with extra credit)

1) Pop quizzes (10%)

I will offer **six** pop writing opportunities over the course of the semester. Each quiz is worth two points. By taking all six quizzes, you can earn up to two extra credit points towards your semester grade. If you know you will be unable to be in class and want to have the opportunity to take the quiz (if there is one) after class, you’ll need to email me BEFORE class starts at 9:35 am. (No exceptions!) If you do so, I will facilitate your taking the quiz later that day.

2) *Contested Senate election paper (45%)*

Write a 1200-word essay that analyzes a contested Senate election race in the 2022 midterms. Your paper will apply the lessons from political science research on Senate elections to explain which candidate won and why. I'll distribute a detailed description of the paper assignment at the beginning of the semester and a grading rubric for each stage of the paper.

Your Senate election paper grade will be determined as follows:

15% Rough draft
5% Participation in peer review of rough draft
25% Final draft

3) *Blog post -- in the style of The Washington Post's [Monkey Cage](#) (TMC) blog (45%)*

Write a 1200-word blog post in the style of a TMC "Explainer" post (see pp. 3-4 [here](#)). The post will identify an issue or problem in the news related to Congress and/or legislative politics, and draw from political science research to "explain" to non-academic readers what they need to know to understand the politics of the matter. (For example: "Many Democrats want the Senate to ban the legislative filibuster. Here's why that's hard to do." Or, "Congress and the president finally addressed the climate crisis in 2022. This is why it took so long." Or, "Congress hasn't overhauled national immigration laws in decades. Here's why.")

I'll distribute a detailed description of the paper assignment early in the semester and a grading rubric for each stage of the paper. You can familiarize yourself with previously published TMC posts via the TMC Congress topic guide [here](#). Your post must focus on a legislative, rather than election, outcome.

Your blog post grade will be determined as follows:

5% Proposal
15% Rough draft
25% Final draft

IMPORTANT DATES

The papers are *tentatively* scheduled as follows, to be uploaded into Blackboard's Safe Assign software by the time designated on the assignment handout. Any changes will be announced in class. You are responsible for being aware of any changes.

Senate election analysis

January 25: Assignment distributed
February 8: Rough draft due
February 22: Graded rough draft returned
March 8: Peer edit workshop
March 10: Final draft due
March 27: Graded final draft returned

TMC blog post

March 20: Assignment distributed
April 3: Paper proposal due
April 10: Graded paper proposal returned
April 24: Rough draft due
May 5: Graded rough draft returned
May 12: Final draft due

UNIVERSITY POLICIES AND RESOURCES

Campus Commitment & Policy

I encourage you to familiarize yourself with the campus commitment [policy](#). By coming back to campus, students, staff, and faculty are agreeing to this policy. In our classroom environment, the section “Care for Others” is especially important, including the requirement for students to be masked in class.

GW Writing Center

The GW Writing Center facilitates collaborative, critical, and inclusive conversations about student writing. Working alongside peer mentors, student writers develop strategies to write independently in academic and public settings. You are encouraged (but not required) to use the Writing Center at any stage of writing, from brainstorming to final editing. Although appointments are not required and drop-ins are welcome, they recommend that you reserve a time slot at <https://gwu.mywconline.com>.

University policy on observance of religious holidays

In accordance with University policy, 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. For details and policy, see: students.gwu.edu/accommodations-religious-holidays.

Academic integrity code

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 details and complete code, see: studentconduct.gwu.edu/code-academic-integrity

Disability Support Services (DSS)

Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential impact of a disability should contact Disability Support Services in Rome Hall, 801 22nd Street, NW, Suite 102, to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information see: <http://disabilitysupport.gwu.edu>.

Counseling and Psychological Services 202-994-5300

GW's Student Health Center offers counseling and psychological services, supporting mental health and personal development by collaborating directly with students to overcome challenges and difficulties that may interfere with academic, emotional, and personal success. For additional information see <http://healthcenter.gwu.edu/counseling-and-psychological-services>.

Safety and security

In an emergency: call GYPD 202-994-6111 or 911. For situation-specific actions: review the Emergency Response Handbook: <http://safety.gwu.edu/emergency-response-handbook>. In an active violence situation: Get Out, Hide Out, or Take Out: <http://go.gwu.edu/shooterprep>. Stay informed: <http://safety.gwu.edu/stay-informed>.

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 should 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.

Introduction (January 18)

Davidson et al, Chapter 1

NYT: “[A Day of Rage: An In-Depth Look at How a Mob Stormed the Capitol](#)” (video)

WP: “[Fear, anger and trauma: How the Jan. 6 attack changed Congress](#)” (Jan 3, 2022)

Draper, “[From Gingrich to McCarthy, The Roots of Governance by Chaos](#),” NYT, Jan. 7, 2023.

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

Congressional districts (January 23, 25, 30)

Davidson et al, Chapter 3

Smith, Note 18: [Why 435?](#)

McCarty, “How Does Electoral Law Affect Polarization?” Ch. 6, *Polarization*, 2019

Warshaw et. al., “[Districts for a New Decade](#),” *Publius* (Summer 2022)

Liptak, “[Supreme Court Bars Challenges to Partisan Gerrymandering](#),” NYT, June 27, 2019

Toobin, “[Holder v. Roberts](#),” *The New Yorker*, February 17, 2014

Itkowitz, “[Once again, Alabama is the battleground over Black voting rights](#),” WP, April 6, 2022.

Congressional elections (February 1, 6, 8, 13)

Davidson et al, Chapter 4

Smith, Note 6: [Party and Incumbency](#)

Jacobson, “The Presidential and Congressional Elections of 2020” *PSQ* 2021

Jacobson and Carson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections* (Chapters 5 and 6), 10th ed. 2020

Rakich, “[Yes, Special Elections Really Are Signaling...](#)” *Fivethirtyeight* Aug 2022

Algara and Bae, “[Did amateur candidates cost Republicans the Senate?](#)” *WPost* Dec. 2022

Hopkins, “[Independent Voters are More Important Than Ever](#),” *WPost*, Dec. 2022

Film (February 15) **Class starts at 9:30 am **

[Knock down the House](#) (Netflix, 82 minutes excluding credits)

No class -- President's day (February 20)

Origins and development of Congress (February 22, February 27)

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

Smith, Note 5: [Reforming the Filibuster](#)

Smith, Note 17: [Manchin and Sinema](#)

NPR *Throughline* podcast: [Pirates of the Senate](#) (audio)

Congressional Budget Act (March 1)

Smith, Note 10: [Reconciliation](#)

Reynolds, "The Politics of the Budget and Appropriations Process in a Polarized Congress," *Cong Recon* 2021

Representation: The electoral connection (March 6)

Davidson et al, Chapters 5 and 16

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

Smith, Note 8: [Diversifying](#)

Smith, Note 26: [An Unpopular Congress](#)

Herndon, "[The Congressional Black Caucus: Powerful, Diverse and Newly Complicated](#)," *NYT* Aug 2021

Swers, "From the Republican Revolution to the Tea Party Wave," from *The Right Women* 2018

Flores, "[Most Republicans ignored constituents' opinions on marriage equality](#)," *WP*, Aug. 16, 2022

Peer edit workshop in class (March 8)

**Congressional committees (March 20, 22, 27)
(Spring break March 13, 15)**

Davidson et al, Chapter 7

Mayhew, *Congress*, Part 2

Smith, Note 2: [Beneath the Surface](#)

Smith, Note 27: [Motivation and Capacity](#)

Smith, Note 22: [From Subcommittee Government to Party Government](#)

Kane, "[‘It’s fast and furious’: New GOP committee chairs face learning curve.](#)" *WPost*, Jan. 2023

Leaders and parties in Congress (March 29, April 3, 5)

Davidson et al, Chapter 6

Smith, Note 21: [Congressional Parties](#)

Smith, Note 9: [Professional Partisan](#)

Smith, Note 35: [Polarization, Centralization, Factions, and Speaker Kevin McCarthy](#)

Blitzer, "[What Kevin McCarthy will do to gain power](#)," *New Yorker*, Dec. 2022,
Fong, "[How Nancy Pelosi overcame her opposition...](#)" *WPost*, Jan 4 2019
CNN, "[19 seconds of drama: McCain's vote](#)" (McCain thumbs down on ACA repeal/replace, 2017)
Osnos, "[The Man Who Controls the Senate](#)," *The New Yorker*, June 2021.
Hulse, "[Chuck Schumer, the 'happy worrier' delivers](#)," *NYT*, August 7, 2022.

"Unorthodox lawmaking" (April 10, 12, 17, 19)

Davidson et al, Chapters 8-9
Smith, Note 20: [House Special Rules](#)
Smith, Note 14: [Regular Order](#)
Smith, Note 23: [Unanimous Consent in the Senate, Part 1](#)

Lawrence, "[When America Stared into the Abyss](#)," *The Atlantic*, Jan. 7, 2019
Taibbi, "[Four Amendments & a Funeral](#)," *Rolling Stone*, August 10, 2005
Grunwald, "[The Victory of 'No'](#)," *Politico Magazine*, December 2016
Davenport & Friedman, "[Five Decades in the Making...](#)" *NYT* Aug. 7, 2022.
Wang, "[Violence Against Women Act set to be renewed...](#)" *WP*, March 9, 2022

Politics of deadlock and deal-making (April 24)

Binder, "The Struggle to Legislate in Polarized Times," *Congress Reconsidered* (2021)
Binder and Lee, "[Making Deals in Congress](#)," APSA Task Force (2013)
Lizza, "[Getting to Maybe](#)," *New Yorker*, June 24, 2013
Goodwin, "[Thom Tillis emerges as a bipartisan dealmaker...](#)" *WPost*, Jan. 2023

Making public policy: Congress, the president, and the courts (April 26, May 1, 3-- designated Monday)

Davidson, Chapters 10-12, 14-15
Smith, Note 28: [Where Did the Vetoes Go?](#)

Chafetz, excerpt from *Congress's Constitution* (TBA)
Kriner and Schickler, "Congressional investigations in a polarized era..." *Cong Reconsidered* 2021
Goldgeier and Saunders, "[The Unconstrained Presidency](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, Sept-Oct 2018
Schultz, "[Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy](#)" *The Washington Quarterly* Winter 2018.