

PSC 2218: Legislative Politics
Professor Sarah Binder
Spring 2014

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Class meets: M, W 9:35 – 10:50 am
Funger 222
Office hours: Mondays 11 am -12:45 pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION and LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As registered by Gallup in recent opinion polls, some ninety percent of Americans disapprove of the U.S. Congress. Recent congresses have been called the “worst ever,” as 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 parties splitting control of the chambers and the branches and midterm elections looming in November, few hold out hope that Congress’s performance will improve in 2014. Why are the parties so polarized, and why has lawmaking proved so difficult in recent years? More broadly, this course affords us the 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 the U.S. 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 basic electoral, institutional, and systemic features of the U.S. Congress.
2. Accurately apply political science concepts (e.g. power, representation) that relate to congressional politics.
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 a course paper and group projects.

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 that bear on legislative politics and the 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 (in particular the *Washington Post* or *New York Times*) or that you listen to a news program such as NPR’s *Morning Edition* or *All Things Considered*. (*The Daily Show* is a good supplement, and my kids swear by BuzzFeed, though I don’t know that I’d use it as my primary news source.) 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 four 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*, 8th ed. Cambridge 2013

Dodd, Lawrence, and Bruce Oppenheimer, *Congress Reconsidered*, 10th ed. CQ Press 2012
David Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. Yale University Press. 2nd 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 before each of the exams. 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 26, 2014

Group project: Mon., April 7, 2014

Paper due: Wed. April 30th (in class, last day of course)

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 of the topics. This is a tentative schedule intended to give you an overview of the course. I will at times get ahead or behind the announced 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 13

Introduction

Smith et. al., Chapter 1

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 1 and 2

Bettelheim, "Aim Low, Fire with Care," *CQ Weekly*, Jan 6, 2014 (BB)

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

Boyer, "[House Rule: Will Boehner Control the Tea Party Congress?](#)" *New Yorker*, December 13, 2010 (BB)

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

January 15, 22 (no class Jan. 20)

Congress and the Constitution

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

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapter 16

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

January 27, 29

Origins and development of Congress

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

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 7

Binder, *Stalemate*, Chapters 1-2

February 3, 5, 10, 12, 19, 24 (no class Feb. 17)

Congressional elections

Smith et. al. Chapter 3

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 5, 6, 18

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

McCarty, Nolan, "The Limits of Electoral and Legislative Reform in Addressing Polarization," *California Law Review*, Vol. 99 (359-372) 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)

Ansolahehere, Steven, "[Unsafe Seats,](#)" *The Boston Review*, Jan/Feb 2011 (BB)

February 26

Midterm exam in class – tentative—could get pushed back to March 3

March 3

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

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

March 5

Representation: The electoral connection

Smith et. al., Chapter 4

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

March 17, 19, 24

Congressional committees

Smith et. al, Chapter 6

Mayhew, *Congress*, Part 2

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapter 8

March 26, 31, April 2

Leaders and parties in Congress

Smith et. al., Chapter 5

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 7, 8 and 9

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

Przybyla and Mattingly, “[Pelosi Searches Caucus for Clues to Winning Syria Vote.](#)” *Bloomberg.com*, Sep. 16, 2013.

April 7

Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock

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

April 9, 14, 16, 21

“Unorthodox lawmaking”

Smith et. al, Chapters 7-8

Binder and Smith, Chapters 5-7

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapter 9

Lizza, “[The House of Pain](#)” *New Yorker*, March 4, 2013 (BB)

Binder, “[Oh 113th 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)

Bettelheim, “[Going Nuclear.](#)” *CQ Weekly*, Dec. 2, 2013 (BB)

April 23, 28, 30 (designated Monday)

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

Smith et. al., Chapters 9-12

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 11, 13-14

Howell and Pevehouse, "When Congress Stops Wars," *Foreign Policy* 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)

Patterson et al, "Targeting Success: The Enduring Power of the NRA," *Interest Group Politics* (2007) (BB)