

PSC 118: Legislative Politics
Professor Sarah Binder
Spring 2009

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Class meets: T,Th 12:45 am- 2:00 pm
MPA B07
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Office hours (Binder): Thursdays 2-4pm
(467 Monroe)

Office hours (Caan): Mondays 12-2pm
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COURSE DESCRIPTION and LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In the midterm elections of 2006, Democrats gained control of both the House and Senate for the first time in twelve years. Despite calls for a change in Iraq war policy, support for expanding health care insurance, intentions to reform immigration policy, and other aspirations of the Democrats, Congressional Democrats had only mixed results to show after their first two years in power. But after the 2008 elections, with a Democratic president entering the White House in January 2009 and increased Democratic majorities in both the House and Senate, the likelihood of major policy change to address the nation's towering financial crisis and other vexing public problems has been enhanced. Unified party control, however, is rarely a magic bullet, especially given the polarization of the nation's two political parties and the array of congressional rules and practices that often frustrate the designs of even the most cohesive majorities.

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. By the end of the semester, you should have a firm understanding of:

- The origins and development of Congress
- The electoral rules of the game and the dynamics that fuel congressional election outcomes
- The institutional elements of the modern Congress and how they shape congressional choices.
- The tradeoffs faced by Congress as it strives to be both a representative body and a lawmaking institution
- The impact of political parties, congressional committees, and external influences (including the president, the courts, and interest groups) on Congress.

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. Keeping up with the news is thus a very good idea, and will enhance the value of the course for you. 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, 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.

Steven S. Smith, J. M. Roberts, and R.J. VanderWielen, *The American Congress*, 5th ed. Cambridge 2007
Dodd, Lawrence, and Bruce Oppenheimer, *Congress Reconsidered*, 9th ed. CQ Press 2009
David Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. Yale University Press. 2nd Edition, 2004.
Costas Panagopoulos and Joshua Schank. *All Roads Lead to Congress*. CQ Press, 2008.

GRADED ASSIGNMENTS and CLASS POLICIES

Your grade in this course will be based on a midterm exam (30%), a final exam (40%) and a 6-8 page paper (30%). 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 (mid-term exam, paper, final exam). ***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: February 24, 2009

Paper due: April 30, 2008 (in class—make up day)

Final exam: TBA when the Registrar posts the exam schedule

Note: In accord with university policy, the final exam will be given during the final exam period 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 1-3

Binder, Mann, Ornstein, Reynolds, "[Assessing the 110th Congress, Anticipating the 111th](#)" Jan. 2009 (BB)

Nather, "Obama's Next Task: Quick Rise to a Steep Challenge," *CQ Weekly* Jan. 2009 (BB)

January 15, 22 Congress and the Constitution

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

January 27, 29 Origins and development of Congress

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

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 7, 9, 16

February 3, 5, 10, 12, 17, 19 Congressional elections

Smith et. al. Chapter 3

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 4, 18

Phillips, "[New Voices in Congress Will Change the Tone of the Democratic Majority.](#)" *NYT*, Jan. 2009 (BB)

Toobin, "[The Great Election Grab.](#)" *The New Yorker*, December 8, 2003 (BB)

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

Jacobson, "Competition in U.S. Congressional Elections," in *The Marketplace of Democracy* (Cato/Brookings (2006) (BB)

Jacobson, "[Referendum: The 2006 Midterm Congressional Elections.](#)" *Political Science Quarterly* (2007) (BB)

February 24

Midterm exam in class
(Tentative—Could get pushed back to Feb. 26)

February 26

Film: "[Can Mr. Smith Get to Washington Anymore?](#)" or [I.O.U U.S.A.](#)

March 3

Representation: The electoral connection

Smith et. al., Chapter 5
Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, Part 1
Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapter 6, 15

March 5, 10, 12

Congressional committees

Smith et. al, Chapter 7
Mayhew, Part 2
Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapter 10
Start Panagopoulos and Schank, *All Roads Lead to Congress*

March 17, 19 Spring break

Good time to make progress on *All Roads Lead to Congress*

March 24, 26, 31

Leaders and parties in Congress

Smith et. al., Chapter 6
Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapter 8 and re-read Chapters 1-2

April 2, 7, 9, 14

"Unorthodox lawmaking"

Smith et. al, Chapters 4 and 8
Finish *All Roads Lead to Congress*
Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapter 13
Taibbi, "[Four Amendments & a Funeral,](#)" *Rolling Stone*, August 10, 2005 (BB)
Jeffrey Toobin, "[Blowing Up the Senate.](#)" *The New Yorker*, March 7, 2005 (BB)
Gang of 14, "Memorandum of Understanding on Judicial Nominations" (BB)

April 16

Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock

Binder, "Elections, Parties, and Governance," *The Legislative Branch* (2005) (BB)

April 21, 23, 30 (No class on April 28)

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

Smith et. al., Chapters 9-12

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 11, 12, 14

Bettelheim, "The Shape of the Office," *CQ Weekly*, Jan. 5, 2009 (BB)

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