

PSC 192W: Congressional Dilemmas
(Writing in the Disciplines seminar)
Professor Sarah Binder
Spring 2010

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Class meets: Wednesdays, 3:30-5:00 pm
Monroe B-36
Office Hours: Mondays 2-4pm (or by appt.)

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This course explores political, institutional and policy puzzles and dilemmas in the U.S. Congress. Our goals for the seminar are two-fold. First, in substantive terms, the course is intended to broaden and deepen our collective understanding of Congress by trying to unravel congressional “dilemmas.” How should congressional districts be designed? What is the value (and the cost) of competitive congressional elections? What role should (or shouldn’t) Congress play in reviving the economy? Why is the Senate considered such a dysfunctional body? Is it time to do away with the filibuster? Second, because this seminar is designated as “writing in the discipline” (WID), our goal is also to learn about, practice, and improve our ability to write in the discipline of political science.

As a result of completing this course, you should be able to:

1. Analyze Congressional dilemmas, identifying and explaining the institutional and electoral dimensions of the issue.
2. Execute several different types of writing relevant to the study and practice of legislative politics and political science.
3. Demonstrate the ability to think and write critically about the U.S. Congress.

REQUIRED 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). (Please note that I do not receive royalties from your purchase of the Binder and Smith book.)

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.

Sarah Binder and Steven S. Smith. *Politics or Principle? Filibustering in the United States Senate* (1997)

Thomas Brunell, *Redistricting & Representation* (2008)

David Mayhew, *Divided We Govern, 1946-2002* (2nd edition) (2005)

CLASS PARTICIPATION

Seminars only succeed—and are only enjoyable—if you come to class prepared to contribute. Your participation in the seminar is extremely important, and will contribute to your final grade in the course. Your participation will be strongest if you complete all the readings and assignments due that day, if you bring the readings with you to class, and if you come to class ready to ask questions, to listen to your classmates, and to contribute your thoughts to our discussion.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

The course assignments are designed to help you to learn about congressional politics and to fulfill the objectives of a WID seminar. You must complete all of the assignments in order to receive a passing grade in the course. Also, given the number of writing assignments in the course, assignments must be handed in on time. Late papers will be docked 5 points each day it is late (out of a possible 100 points). Exceptions to the no-late-assignments rule will be given for illness or family emergencies, so long as you communicate with me before the assignment is due.

Your final grade will be a weighted average of each of the course assignments:

Participation	20%
Writing assignment #1 (In-class exercise Jan. 27)	10%
Writing assignment #2 (Research paper question)	5%
Writing assignment #3 (Op-ed on filibuster reform)	10%
Writing assignment #4 (Research paper outline)	5%
Writing assignment #5 (Short paper Fed audit)	10%
Writing assignment #6 (research paper draft)	not graded
Writing assignment #7 (final research paper)	40%

WRITING RESOURCES

You may find it helpful over the course of the semester to seek guidance and advice on improving your writing. I am always available to assist you as you prepare your writing assignments. You may also wish to consult writing resources that are available at GW or on-line. Here are three places to start:

1. The GW Writing Center has a wealth of expertise and advice, and it provides one-on-one writing consultations. Its website is here: <http://www.gwu.edu/~gwriter/>
2. Gelman Library maintains a WID website: <http://libguides.gwu.edu/wid> The site provides links to a wide range of resources. I encourage you to avail yourself of all the goodies there.
3. I like the on-line writing resources offered by Dartmouth College on its website. Take a look!
<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/toc.shtml>

COURSE SCHEDULE

The seminar schedule on the following pages outlines the topics we will cover in seminar and the reading and writing assignments for each of the topics. 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 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: Introductory meeting

January 20: Do Parties Matter?

Do Congress and the president accomplish more when a single party controls Congress and the White House? Why or why not? How do Mayhew's and Binder's methods differ? Why does measurement matter?

Mayhew, *Divided We Govern*: Preface to 2nd edition, Chapters 1, 3-5, skim 6, 7, Epilogue
Binder, "Elections and Congress's Governing Capacity," *Extensions* Spring 2005 (BB)

January 27: In-class writing exercise

Writing assignment #1:

I give you a short article related to Obama's first year in office under unified Democratic control. You will be asked to write a short essay (open book, 3-5 pages) applying the arguments from the Mayhew and Binder readings. You are welcome to bring a laptop to class for the writing exercise.

February 3: Filibuster I (historical perspective)

What are the origins of the Senate filibuster? (Was it part of the framers' intentions for the upper chamber?) How was the filibuster used historically? Is today's partisan use of the filibuster unprecedented? Why does the history of the filibuster "matter" for understanding filibuster politics today?

Binder and Smith, *Politics or Principle?* Chapters 1-4

February 10: Filibuster II (contemporary politics)

What is the most persuasive case for reforming the filibuster? What is the most persuasive case for preserving it? Why is it so hard to rein in the filibuster?

Binder and Smith, *Politics or Principle?* Chapters 5-7

Jeffrey Toobin, "[Blowing Up the Senate.](#)" *The New Yorker*, March 7, 2005 (BB)

Bill Frenzel, "Defending the Dinosaur: The Case for Not Fixing the Filibuster," *Brookings Review*, Summer 1995 (BB)

Paul Krugman, "[A Dangerous Dysfunction.](#)" *NYT*, Dec. 21st, 2009 (BB)

Will Wilkinson, "[The Senate is Not Too Slow.](#)" Will Wilkinson blog, Dec. 29, 2009 (BB)

Ross Douthat, "[The Filibuster, Once More.](#)" Evaluations blog (NYT), Jan .5, 2010 (BB)

February 17: Research paper topics

Writing assignment #2:

Write a 1-2 page (double-spaced) paper describing your research question. What question are you asking about Congressional politics? Why is it an interesting question or puzzle?

We will use the seminar period to discuss paper topics. Come prepared to discuss your paper.

February 24: In-class debate (Should the filibuster be abolished?)

Writing assignment #3:

To prepare for the debate, select a state/senator. Pretend you are that senator. Write a 600-word op-ed staking out your position for or against filibuster reform. (You must write your own op-ed...No delegating to staff!). Be sure to tell your reader why you are right and your critics why they are wrong. (In other words, you must both make an argument for your position AND anticipate arguments against your position.)

In class, we will divide into two debate teams—for and against filibuster reform.

March 3: Politics of congressional earmarks

What are earmarks, what types of legislators are most likely to secure them, and why are they so unpopular in the press? And why do legislators (and party leaders) pursue earmarks if they are so unpopular?

Porter and Walsh, "[Earmarks in the Federal Budget Process](#)," Harvard Law School briefing paper (2008) (BB).

Diana Evans, *Greasing the Wheels*, Chapter TBA (BB)

Engstrom and Vanberg, "The Politics of Congressional Earmarking," (need to locate a copy)

March 10:

Writing assignment #4:

Write a 3-5 page (double-spaced) outline of your research paper. Your outline should include your research question/puzzle, your thesis or hypotheses, and a discussion of the types of evidence you will use to explore your thesis.

We will use the seminar period to go over any questions or problems you are encountering.

March 17: Spring Break

Good time to make progress on reading Brunell and working on your research papers.

March 24: Electoral competition

Brunell advances a controversial thesis: Competitive elections are bad for America. How does Brunell reach his conclusion? Is he nuts? Why or why not?

Brunell, *Redistricting and Representation*. All chapters.

March 31: Congress and the Federal Reserve

What compromises underlie the creation of the Federal Reserve in 1913? In what ways was the original Fed “independent”? Independent from whom or what? Why is independence important today? What, if any, should be the limits on central bank independence? Should Congress pass the Ron Paul audit-the-Fed bill? Why or why not?

Johnson, “[Historical Beginnings...The Federal Reserve](#)” (BB) Chapters 1-2 (skim the rest)
Stiglitz, “[Central Banking in a Democratic Society](#),” *De Economist* 1998 (BB), focus on pp. 215-224

Buiter, “[Central banking as partisan politics](#),” *Maverecon* (FT blog), June 27, 2009 (BB)
Ron Paul and Jim DeMint, “[Americans Deserve a Transparent Fed](#)” *WSJ*, November 19, 2009
Ben Bernanke, “[The Right Reform for the Fed](#),” *Washington Post*, November 29, 2009

April 7: Peer editing workshop

Writing assignment #5:

Write a 3-5 page paper evaluating the arguments for and against Rep. Ron Paul’s bill to audit the Federal Reserve. On balance, which position do you support, and why? (Remember to support your position and to anticipate objections to it.)

Reading assignment: Karen Gocsik, “Ways of Reading” (BB).

Bring two copies of your op-ed to class. Hand in one. We will use the other one to break into groups for a peer editing session. I will provide a peer editing worksheet to guide your assessments.

April 14: Women in the Senate

Writing assignment #6: Draft of your research paper due

In class: Why are there so few women in the Senate?

Fourteen Women (movie 2007, 97 minutes)

April 21: Writing consultations

I will be available in class for consultations on your research paper drafts. We’ll set up a schedule before class.

Papers are due on the date of the scheduled final exam (writing assignment #7)

Research papers

Here are a few ideas for potential research papers. Papers will vary in length, depending on the question asked. Most of these topics can be addressed within a 10-page framework. I am completely open to a wide range of topics beyond those listed. I am also open to more rigorous research papers that seek to test ideas empirically with legislative data. Please come to see me early on in the semester as you think about your paper topics.

1. Choose a bill considered by the Senate in the 110th (2007-8) or 111th (2009-2010) Congress. Recreate the legislative history for the bill. How can we explain Congress's policy choices given electoral forces, institutional structures, and presidential-congressional dynamics?
2. Explain and evaluate the politics of reforming the filibuster. What procedural routes would be technically feasible? Are these routes politically feasible?
3. In the run up to the 2008 elections, the Bush administration and the Democratic Congress enacted a \$700 billion bailout of Wall Street. Explain the politics of the bailout bill. What electoral, institutional, and ideological forces helped to account for the bill's precarious route to enactment?
4. *Congressional Quarterly* reported close to a 100% presidential success rate for Obama's legislative initiatives in Congress in 2009. Dissect the data and methodology used to reach this success rate, and evaluate why Obama was able to secure such a high score for 2009.
5. Choose a key vote from 2009 or 2010 in Congress. Develop hypotheses to account for the vote outcome, and model the determinants' of legislators' vote choice. Hint: Do not select a pure party line vote. Votes pertaining to mortgage relief, financial regulatory reform, and climate change are good starting points.