

PSC 118: Legislative Politics
Professor Sarah Binder
Spring 2008

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Class meets: T,Th 11:10 am- 12:25 pm
1957 E. St., Room 211
Office Hours: Tues. 2-4pm (or by appt.)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

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 have only mixed results to show for their year in power. With a Republican president in the White House, less than one year to the next presidential election, and slim Democratic margins in the House and Senate, we face the prospects of another year of intense political competition over the nation's agenda—over domestic affairs and the war in Iraq. Divided party control of Congress and the White House is often a recipe for legislative stalemate, and the current Congress seems fit to confirm that.

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, and the electoral and institutional elements of the modern Congress. Throughout the course we will concern ourselves with the tradeoffs inherent in a modern legislature and with the impact of institutional and electoral rules on legislative behavior and outcomes. Along the way, we will grapple with the power and limits of political parties, committees, and their leaders, and the impact of external forces (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*. (Or at least watch reruns of *The Daily Show* while the writers are on strike...) 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). (Please note that I do **not** receive royalties from your purchase of the Quirk and Binder edited volume.)

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
Paul J. Quirk and Sarah A. Binder, Eds., *The Legislative Branch*. Oxford U. Press, 2005.
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

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 21, 2008

Paper due: April 29, 2008 (in class)

Final exam: TBA when the Registrar posts the exam schedule

COURSE SCHEDULE

The course schedule on the following page 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. I have also posted a copy of the syllabus on my website (<http://home.gwu.edu/~binder/spring118.html>). If you have any trouble accessing any of the on-line pieces, please let me know as soon as possible.

January 15
Introduction

Smith et. al., Chapter 1

Mann, Binder, and Reynolds, [“Is the Broken Branch on the Mend?”](#) Brookings, October 2007 (BB)

Quirk and Binder, Introduction.

Nather, “A Crisis of Confidence in Congress,” *CQ Weekly*, Oct. 22, 2007 (BB)

January 17, 22
Congress and the Constitution

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

Quirk and Binder, Chapter 1

January 24, 29
Origins and development of Congress

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

Quirk and Binder, Chapter 2

January 31, February 5, 7, 12, 14, 19
Congressional elections

Smith et. al. Chapter 3

Quirk and Binder, Chapters 4 and 6

Berenson, “Swing Voters Change Course,” Nov. 13, 2006 (BB)

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

Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning, “Don’t Blame Redistricting for Uncompetitive Elections,” *PS* (2006)

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 21

Midterm exam in class

(Tentative—Could get pushed back to Feb. 26)

February 26

Film: “Can Mr. Smith Get to Washington Anymore?”

February 28**Representation: The electoral connection**

Smith et. al., Chapter 5

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

Quirk and Binder, Chapter 10

March 4, 6**Congressional committees**

Smith et. al., Chapter 7

Mayhew, Part 2

Quirk and Binder, Chapter 7

Start Panagopoulos and Schank, *All Roads Lead to Congress*

March 15, 17 Spring break

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

March 25, 27, April 1**Leaders and parties in Congress**

Smith et. al., Chapter 6

Quirk and Binder, Chapters 8 and 9

Yachnin, "Pelosi trumps chairs." *Roll Call*, November 2007

April 3, 8, 10, 15**"Unorthodox lawmaking"**

Smith et. al., Chapters 4 and 8

Finish *All Roads Lead to Congress*

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

Barshay, "Two Senators Who Held Up the Corporate Tax Bill—And What They Got in Return," *CQ Weekly* (2004), (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 17**Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock**

Quirk and Binder, Chapter 5

April 22, 24

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

Smith et. al., Chapters 9-12

Quirk and Binder, Chapters 12-15

Perine, "Imbalance of Power in War on Terror," *CQ Weekly* (Feb. 27, 2006) (BB)

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

April 29 (Make-up class if needed; reading still required)

The Future of Congress

Quirk and Binder, Chapters 16-18