

PSC 2118: Legislative Politics
Professor Sarah Binder
Spring 2012

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Class meets: M,W 11:10am-12:25 pm
Duques 152
Office hours: Wednesdays 1:30-3:30 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. The current 112th Congress has been called the “worst Congress ever”—as the two parties in 2011 brought the country to the brink of shutting down the government and defaulting on the nation’s debt. With split party control of the chambers and divided party control of Congress and the White House, few hold out hope that 2012 will see much improvement in congressional performance, particularly during the run up to a presidential election. Why has lawmaking proved so polarizing and difficult in recent years? Why has the new GOP House majority struggled to implement deep cuts in federal spending and to repeal of Democrats’ recent health care and financial reforms? More broadly, this course affords us the opportunity to explore and to explain the electoral and institutional forces that shape the contemporary Congress and its 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.

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. (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*, 7th ed. Cambridge 2011
Dodd, Lawrence, and Bruce Oppenheimer, *Congress Reconsidered*, 9th ed. CQ Press 2009
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 (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 29, 2012

Paper due: Wed. May 2nd (in class, last day)

Final exam: TBA when the Registrar posts the final exam schedule (sometime between May 7-15)

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 18 Introduction

Smith et. al., Chapter 1

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 1 and 3

Schatz, "United Front: Tension Beneath" *CQ Weekly*, Jan. 16, 2012 (BB) (or on-line <http://www.cq.com/doc/weeklyreport-4011281>)

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?](#) *The New Yorker*, December 13, 2010 (BB)

January 23, 25 Congress and the Constitution

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

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapter 2

January 30, Feb 1 Origins and development of Congress

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

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 7, 16

Binder, *Stalemate*, Chapters 1-2

February 6, 8, 13, 15, 22, 27 Congressional elections

Smith et. al. Chapter 3

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 4, 5, 6, 18

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

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

Jacobson, "The 2008 Presidential and Congressional Elections," *PSQ* Spring 2009 (BB)

Jacobson, "The Republican Resurgence in 2010," *PSQ* Spring 2011 (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 29 Midterm exam in class – tentative—could get pushed back to March 5

March 5

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

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

March 7

Representation: The electoral connection

Smith et. al., Chapter 5

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

March 19, 21, 26

Congressional committees

Smith et. al., Chapter 7

Mayhew, Part 2

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapter 10

March 28, April 2, 4

Leaders and parties in Congress

Smith et. al., Chapter 6

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 7, 8 and 9

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

April 9, 11, 16, 18

"Unorthodox lawmaking"

Smith et. al., Chapters 4 and 8

Binder and Smith, Chapters 5-7

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

Lee, "[Making Laws and Making Points: Senate Governance in an Era of Uncertain Majorities](#)" *The Forum* 2011 (BB)

Smith, "[The Senate Syndrome](#)" *Issues in Governance Studies*, Brookings Institution June 2010 (BB)

April 23

Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock

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

April 25, 30, May 2 (designated Monday)

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

Smith et. al., Chapters 9-12

Dodd and Oppenheimer, Chapters 11, 12, 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)

Council on Foreign Relations, "[Judging Guantanamo: The Court, Congress, and the White House](#)" 2009 (BB)