

The U.S. Congress

Syllabus

Northeastern University
POLS 3300/7251, Fall 2016
Th 5:00pm - 8:00pm
220 Behrakis Health Sciences Center

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Office Hours: Th 3:00pm-4:30pm, and by appointment.

Course Description

Congress is the heart of US national politics – almost all national policy either originates with, or must go through, Congress. Congress is much more than the rules and traditions that govern it, and to truly understand how the machine functions we need to examine the issue from every angle: elections, voters, money, committees, courts, the executive, etc. Our approaches in this class will range from the broad perspective (history, candidates, voters, districts) to internal dynamics (parties, committees, rules) and other institutions and issues (the Presidency, the peculiarities of the Senate, polarization). This seminar will focus not just on learning how Congress works (or fails to), but also on the broader question of how we go about testing our theories as political scientists. Discussion will be oriented around a careful analysis of a number of seminal and recent papers in Congressional research, with an eye towards better understanding Congress while at the same time exploring the strengths and weaknesses of approaches such as quantitative analysis, qualitative and historical description, and game-theoretic and spatial modeling. No one semester can truly capture the vast complexity of this institution at the heart of American government, but this seminar aims to give students a firm grounding in the key issues and insights gleaned from the last 50 years of Congressional research.

Requirements

The main project for this class will be a final paper, worth 20% of the grade. This will be a sustained analysis of a campaign or legislative issue, or a quantitative test of some hypothesis, of 10-15 pages, due at the end of the semester. There were also be two relatively short exams, at the middle of the term and during the final exam period, each worth 20%. But because this is a discussion-based seminar, of equal cumulative importance will be the in-class participation and smaller assignments along the way. Each student will be asked to briefly introduce one or two articles to the rest of the class, along with a critique of that article (10%). Grad students will

be asked to find relevant articles from the congressional research literature (I recommend Google Scholar), while undergrads may do this, or may use one of the articles we will be providing as part of the course readings. Towards the end of the semester, students will also give a presentation summarizing the research questions, analysis, and results in their final project (10%). Finally, as a daily practice, I will ask everyone to generate questions for discussion before the start of class, and also bring in news articles from newspapers or online sources, along with a brief comment about what interesting issue you think it raises. Discussions will be structured in part around these reading questions, so regular participation in this aspect of the class will be essential (10%). This combination of textbook, essays, and daily reading and news pieces should keep discussion as rich and multifaceted as the subject matter itself is.

Grade breakdown

- Midterm exam: 20%
- Final exam: 20%
- Paper presentation: 10%
- Paper: 20%
- Article presentation: 10%
- Reading questions, news items, etc: 10%
- Participation: 10%

Required texts

(Available at the Northeastern bookstore or via Amazon.)

1. Roger Davidson, Walter Oleszek and Frances Lee, *Congress and its Members*. 15th Edition, CQ Press, 2015 [CM]
2. Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. 9th Edition, Pearson, 2015 [J]
3. Steven Smith, Jason Roberts, and Ryan Vander Wielen, *The American Congress Reader*. Cambridge University Press, 2009 [ACR]
4. Recommended: Lawrence Dodd and Bruce Oppenheimer, *Congress Reconsidered*. 10th Edition, CQ Press, 2013 [Dodd]

Policies

Attendance. Attendance is mandatory, particularly for a once-weekly class. More than 1 absence will reduce your final grade by 1/3 a letter for each additional absence, unless there are extenuating circumstances approved by me ahead of time. I'll be using the reading questions as an attendance-checking mechanism, so be sure to get those in every day you're here.

Devices. All phones and similar devices should be off during class. Laptops are permitted, but only for note taking and brief research when requested. Other use of the internet, email, Facebook, Twitter, etc, etc, is not permitted. I can usually tell when you're doing it even if I can't see your screen (either a person is looking steadily down, or they are looking up and down repeatedly without typing much ;)

Incompletes. Except in the most serious circumstances, Incompletes in this course are not possible. If the professor agrees to an Incomplete, a form in the Political Science Department must be filled out, representing a contract between the student and the faculty member on when and how the course will be completed.

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty. The Department of Political Science takes very seriously the issue of academic honesty. Any student who cheats on an exam or in the preparation and writing of a course assignment at minimum will fail the assignment in question, and may fail the course. Further, the Department can recommend that the student be put on academic probation (as outlined in the University's Code of Conduct). Individual faculty, with the support of the Department, can impose harsher penalties as they deem necessary.

Cheating includes plagiarism, which is defined broadly as taking ideas, concepts, or actual words of another person or author and passing them off as your own work. This includes but is not limited to cut and paste construction of a paper, buying a term paper, pulling a paper off of the Internet, or using materials from the Internet without acknowledging the source. If you have any questions regarding proper attribution of the work of others, contact your instructor prior to submitting the work for evaluation.

Course Schedule (as of 9/8/16)

Week	Date	Topic and Readings
1	Sept 8	Introductions
2	Sept 15	What is Congress for and Who's to blame? CM 1, 2, ACR 4, 5; ACR 2, 3
3	Sept 22	Congress and its Consituencies CM 5, ACR 6, 10
4	Sept 29	Choosing to Run and Incumbency CM 3 (pp 56-74), J 3, ACR 9
5	Oct 6	Gerrymandering and Redistricting CM 3 (pp 41-56), J 2, ACR 8, Abramowitz
6	Oct 13	Campaigns and Money CM 4, J 4, Dodd: Sulkin; CM 13, ACR 36
7	Oct 20	Voting and Ideology J 5, Dodd: Erikson, Canes-Wrone MIDTERM
8	Oct 27	Polarization, Parties and Congressional Voting CM 9, ACR 26, J 7
9	Nov 3	Policies and Budgets, and Leadership CM 14, ACR 38; CM 6, ACR 14
10	Nov 10	Rules and Committees CM 7, 8; ACR 22, 23
11	Nov 17	The Bureaucracy and Hearings CM 11, 12, ACR 19, 34, 35
12	Nov 24	THANKSGIVING

13 Dec 1 The President and Gridlock
CM 10, ACR 28-29, ACR 31, Dodd: Dodd, Lee

14 Dec 8 Paper Presentations and Wrap-up
FINAL PAPER DUE

Dec 12-16 Final Exam

Dec 19 Course grades submitted to Registrar