



PSC 333: The U.S. Congress

207 Graham Building

Mondays & Wednesdays, 2:00-3:15

Spring 2008

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Course Description

This course will examine the evolution and current standing of the U.S. Congress within the American political system. We will study a number of related questions: How do legislators balance serving localized constituency interests at the same time that they must produce legislation that affects the nation as a whole? What are the competing centers of power and influence in Congress, and what determines which area of influence is dominant? What are the differences between the House and the Senate and to what varying substantive ends do these differences lead? How has increased partisan polarization influenced Congress? How extensive is the incumbency advantage in congressional elections? What roles do money, party, and the efforts of hundreds of individual candidates play in such elections?

Contemplating and answering these questions will require a working knowledge of the partisan control of Congress since World War II. Use the following paragraphs as an all-too-brief primer on this recent history. I will refer to this information often and will assume that you know it cold. Recent elections have changed the United States Congress in important – often profound – ways. From 1933 through 1994, the Democratic Party formed the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, interrupted only by two brief instances of Republican control: the 80th Congress (1947-48) and the 83rd Congress (1953-54). In the U.S. Senate, Democrats enjoyed majority status over the same time period with three exceptions, the above two plus, more notably, the 97th through 99th Congresses, which coincided with the first six years of the Reagan administration (1981-86).

The 1994 elections, the first midterm of the Clinton years, resulted in Republican Party control of both houses of Congress for the first time since Dwight Eisenhower's first two years in the White House, 1953-54. In the 1996 elections, the Republicans held onto narrowed congressional majorities. In the 1998 midterm elections, congressional Democrats maintained their strength in the Senate and gained seats in the House, *the first time the president's party had accomplished this feat since 1934*. When the dust settled – finally – after the 2000 election, Republicans found themselves in unified control of the presidency and Congress for the first time since those two Eisenhower years (1953-54). Republicans accomplished this feat despite having lost 1) the national popular vote for president, 2) two House seats, and 3) four Senate seats. The resulting

50-50 partisan split in the Senate lasted all of five months, when a single senator decided to leave the Republican Party to become an Independent. This act, by a man representing the second smallest state in the country, made the Democrats the Senate majority party for the remainder of the 107th Congress. In 2002, the Republican majority pulled off an even more impressive feat than the Democratic minority had in 1998. President Bush's party expanded its majority in the House and recaptured the Senate. The Republicans again gained a handful of seats in both chambers as a result of the 2004 elections and continued in control of a unified federal government.

The conclusion of the 109th Congress, which officially ended on January 3, 2007, represented the first time the Republican Party controlled the presidency and Congress for four consecutive years since the 10 consecutive years they held power from 1921 through 1930. However, the 2006 midterm elections ended Republican ascendancy in Congress. The election returned the Democratic Party to power in both chambers. Democrats gained six seats in the Senate to capture a razor-thin 51-49 majority. In the House, Democrats gained 31 seats to turn a 203-232 minority into a 233-202 majority. While this is a historically narrow margin, it is larger than any majority enjoyed by the Republicans during the previous 12 years. Finally, the current 110th Congress marks the first time that a woman has risen to become Speaker of the House. Rep. Nancy Pelosi's (D, CA-8) election as Speaker means she is second in the line of succession to the presidency, behind only the Vice President.

Course Goals

By the end of the semester, students should develop/improve important skills related to:

- organizing and writing a series of concise research papers;
- researching primary and secondary source materials for these papers;
- analyzing data drawn from a national survey to determine patterns in public opinion and attitudes about government in general and Congress in particular;
- appreciating the complexity of a job that requires its occupants to make laws that benefit the nation while simultaneously standing for reelection before often quite parochial constituents.

Course Requirements

• Exams & In-Class Activities

Grades for the course are based on several components. The first two consist of a midterm exam (March 5), which will account for 20% of each student's grade, and a final exam (May 12 at noon), which will also account for 30% of the grade. Students will also attend class and participate in a series of in-class activities over the course of the semester. Attendance and class activities will constitute 10% of each student's overall grade.

• Research Papers

In class on **Wednesday, January 23**, each student will be assigned the member of Congress whose career and constituency you will research for the required papers. I will also hand out your first paper topic on this day. During the first half of the semester, three paper assignments will require students to collect and analyze various types of information about assigned legislators. For example, each student will research roll-call votes cast by his/her assigned member of Congress. These paper assignments will require students to compare this type of information to the preferences of the assigned legislator's constituency.

During the second half of the semester, the final three paper assignments will require students to analyze a national survey of political opinions and attitudes, and to apply the insights of their analyses to their assigned legislator's reelection campaign. These paper assignments require students to analyze and interpret different aspects of the survey, using a computer program available in the campus computer labs. Students with anxiety about computers or statistics should not worry – too much. I will provide instructions explaining how to use the computer program and the survey. We will also have an orientation session in class on March 17. The challenge of these assignments will not be using the computer program and survey, but in constructing compelling arguments to answer the assigned questions about public attitudes and opinions as they relate to Congress and its members.

The usefulness of the skills related to doing well on these papers extends beyond getting an internship or full-time job in politics. In a legal setting, lawyers must perform research for their clients, summarizing their findings. In the business world, it is important to understand the attitudes and preferences of one's customers; analyzing surveys is, therefore, an essential part of market research. Regardless of your career plans, analyzing data and reporting on them concisely are important *and marketable* skills to have when you reach the "real world."

When calculating a student's overall paper grade at the end of the semester, I will drop the one weekly paper on which the student received his or her lowest grade. Thus, each paper will account for 8% of the overall course grade. I am using only five of the six papers to compute final grades in order to add flexibility to the course requirements. During the semester, emergencies may arise that prevent a student from turning in a paper or from doing a thorough job. Failure to turn in a paper will merit a zero, but this grade will be dropped. Of course, if a student receives two zeros, only one will be dropped, and so forth.

Students are required to turn in their papers at the start of class one week after the assignment is handed out. If a paper is not turned in at the beginning of class, it will be considered late. For each 24-hour period (from the start of class) that a paper is late, the paper's grade will be lowered by ten points (for example, from a 90 to an 80, or from a 75 to a 65).

Finally, you will find the following three sources *extremely* helpful in completing your research assignments. All are available in the Jackson Library or via the library's web site.

<i>Almanac of American Politics</i>	JK271 .A530 2006 edition in Reference Room Previous editions in 5 Tower
<i>CQ's Politics in America</i>	JK1010 .P64 2006 edition in Reference Room Previous editions in 5 Tower
<i>CQ Weekly</i>	Available via UNCG's Journal Finder at journalfinder.uncg.edu/uncg . Type "CQ Weekly" into the text box and click the "Search" button.

• Grading

The overall course grade will be determined as follows:

Assignments & participation	10%
Midterm exam	20
Final exam	30
Paper assignments	<u>40</u>
	100%

The midterm, final, and paper assignments will be graded on a 100-point scale. When determining final course grades, I will calculate the overall numerical averages and use the following table to convert them to letter grades:

Letter scale	Numerical ranges for final grades	Letter scale	Numerical ranges for final grades
A+	>=98	C	>=72, <77
A	>=92, <98	C-	>=70, <72
A-	>=90, <92	D+	>=67, <70
B+	>=87, <90	D	>=62, <67
B	>=82, <87	D-	>=60, <62
B-	>=80, <82	F	>=60
C+	>=77, <80		

• Attendance

Please understand that it will be impossible for you to do well in the course without coming to class. There will be numerous in-class assignments, including simulations of legislative behavior, that require your participation for a number of reasons. First, participation earns you credit toward your class-participation grade. Coming to class and participating actively in class

discussion and on these assignments is a relatively easy way to earn an “A” on 10% of the overall grade. Second, the concepts we act out in the simulations and discuss afterward are crucial to your preparation for the midterm and final, and will also help you complete and understand the research papers. If your plan is irregular attendance, either because the material doesn’t particularly interest you, or because you have other obligations, do yourself a favor: drop the course.

• Required Reading

The following books are required for the course and are available at the university bookstore:

[D&O] Davidson, Roger and Walter Oleszek. 2007. *Congress and Its Members*, Eleventh Edition. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.

[H] Herrnson, Paul. 2007. *Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington*, Fifth Edition. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.

[S] Sinclair, Barbara. 2007. *Unorthodox Lawmaking: New Legislative Processes in the U.S. Congress*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.

In addition, students will be required to read selected articles, assigned in class, from major newspapers and *CQ Weekly*.

• Special Needs

If you have any special needs that will affect your ability to learn in this class, please inform me immediately and appropriate steps will be taken to assist you.

• Cheating & Plagiarism

The university’s Academic Integrity Policy, which addresses the consequences of cheating and plagiarism, is available via the web at:

http://www.uncg.edu/soe/documents/policy_manual/honorpolicy.htm

All work in the course is bound by the Academic Integrity Policy. In accordance with this policy, all paper assignments must provide appropriate citations for any information drawn from outside sources included in the paper. If you have questions about the appropriate format for citations, make sure that you ask me before turning in the paper. You can also visit the Writing Center (3211 HHRA) for additional assistance with citations. All work for the course must be completed individually, with each student responsible for his or her own work. Study together if you wish, but think for yourselves.

- **Classroom Demeanor**

Come to class on time. Turn off cell phones, pagers, and anything else that makes annoying noises. And note this helpful pet-peeve alert: *plan on remaining in class the full 75 minutes*. In other words, do what you have to do so that you don't have to leave during class without good reason. Sauntering in and out of class is disruptive to other students and disrespectful to me.

- **Miscellaneous**

You can make up the midterm exam ONLY if you provide me with advanced, written notice of a reasonable excuse (*e.g.*, extracurricular commitment, illness, family issue). Students who miss the midterm and do not notify me in advance will receive a non-negotiable zero. You CANNOT make up the final exam. Incompletes are not available.

Course Outline

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignment
January 14	Introduction to the Course	Syllabus	
January 16	I. The Two Congresses A. The Evolution of Congress	D&O, chs. 1 & 2	Member choices due
January 21	Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday		
January 23	B. Legislators' Goals & Responsibilities	D&O, ch. 5	Paper #1 assigned
January 28	II. Organization & Process A. Leaders & Parties	D&O, ch. 6	
January 30 February 4	B. Congressional Committees	D&O, ch. 7	Paper #1 due
February 6	C. The Changing Process	S, chs. 1 & 6 D&O, ch. 8	Paper #2 assigned
February 11 February 13	D. Rules & Procedures	S, chs. 2-4	Paper #2 due
February 18	E. Legislative Pathways	S, chs. 7-9	
February 20	F. Deliberation & Roll-Call Voting	D&O, ch. 9	Paper #3 assigned
February 25 February 27	G. Budgetary Politics	D&O, ch. 14 S, chs. 10-12	Paper #3 due
March 3	H. Assessing Unorthodox Lawmaking	S, ch. 13	
March 5	MIDTERM EXAM		

March 10 March 12	Spring Break		
March 17	Mandatory computer and data set instruction. (Crucial for completing final three paper assignments.)		Paper #4 assigned
March 19	III. Constraints on Congress A. The President	D&O, chs. 10 & 15	
March 24	B. The Bureaucracy	D&O, ch. 11	Paper #4 due
March 26	C. The Courts	D&O, ch. 12	
March 31	D. Interest Groups	D&O, ch. 13	
April 2	No Class: Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting		
April 7	D. Interest Groups, continued		Paper #5 assigned
April 9 April 14	IV. The Electoral Connection A. Rules of the Game	D&O, ch. 3 H, ch. 1	Paper #5 due
April 16	B. The Decision to Run	H, ch. 2	
April 21	C. Campaign & Party Organizations	H, chs. 3 & 4	
April 23	D. Money in Campaigns	H, chs. 5 & 6	Paper #6 assigned
April 28	E. Campaign Strategy	D&O, ch. 4 H, chs. 7 & 8	
April 30	F. Winning & Governing	H, chs. 9 & 10	Paper #6 due
May 5	V. Reform & the Two Congresses	H, ch. 11 D&O, ch. 16	
May 7	Reading Day		
May 12	FINAL EXAM (Noon)		