



PSC 333: The U.S. Congress

207 Graham Building

Mondays & Wednesdays, 2:00-3:15

Spring 2010

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Course Description

This course will examine the evolution and current place of the U.S. Congress within the American political system. We will study a number of related questions: How do legislators balance serving parochial constituency interests with producing 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 organization, and the efforts of hundreds of individual candidates play in elections?

Contemplating and answering these questions will require a working knowledge of the partisan control of Congress since the days of Franklin Roosevelt. 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 Congress in important, often profound, ways. From 1933 through 1994, the Democratic Party formed the majority in the 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 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 the 104th Congress (1995-96). In the 1996 elections, the Republicans held onto their 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 the 1934 midterm elections*. However, the Republicans continued as the majority party in both chambers.

When the dust settled – finally – after the 2000 presidential 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) four Senate seats, and 3) two House 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 Vermont, the second least populous state in the country, made the Democrats the Senate majority party for the remainder of the 107th Congress (2001-02). In 2002, the first midterm of the George W. Bush presidency, the Republicans pulled off an even more impressive feat than the Democrats 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 March 1921 to March 1931. However, the 2006 midterm elections, the second of the Bush presidency, ended Republican control of 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 turned a 203-232 minority into a 233-202 majority. With this change in the majority party, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D, CA-8) became the first female Speaker of the House. This made Rep. Pelosi the highest ranking female elected official in the history of the United States, given that the Speaker is second in the line of succession to the presidency, behind only the Vice President.

Democrats gained more ground in Congress as a result of the 2008 elections. In the 111th Congress, the Democrats began with a 257-178 seat advantage in the House. This is the largest House majority either party has enjoyed since the 103rd Congress (1993-94). As a result of this Democratic majority, Speaker Pelosi continues in her leadership role; the House minority leader is Rep. John Boehner (R, OH-8). In the Senate, the Democrats gained eight seats for a 59-41 seat advantage. This is the largest Senate majority since the Democratic Senate of the 96th Congress (1979-80). In late April 2009, Sen. Arlen Specter (D, PA) switched his party affiliation from Republican to Democratic, giving the majority party a 60-40 seat advantage. The Senate majority leader is Sen. Harry Reid (D, NV); the minority leader is Sen. Mitch McConnell (R, KY).

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 3), which will account for 20% of each student's grade, and a final exam (May 12 at noon), which will account for 25% 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 15% of each student's overall grade.

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 except in *extraordinary* circumstances.

• Research Papers

In class on **Wednesday, January 27**, you will be assigned the congressional district that you will research for the required papers. I will also hand out your first paper topic on this date. The first three paper assignments will require you to collect and analyze various types of information about your assigned districts. For example, all students will research the demographic characteristics of their districts. The paper assignments will require you to use this and other information to infer constituency preferences.

The final two paper assignments will require that you analyze a national survey of political opinions and attitudes. These paper assignments demand that you 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 data. We will also have an software orientation session in class on April 5. The challenge of these assignments will not be using the computer program and survey, but building strong 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 pursuing a full-time job in politics. In a legal setting, lawyers must perform research and summarize their findings for their clients. 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 marketing. Regardless of your career plans, analyzing data and reporting on them correctly and concisely are important *and marketable* skills to have when you reach the "real world."

Each of the five paper assignments is worth 8 percent of the final grade. Thus, the paper assignments as a whole account for 40 percent of the grade. Students are required to turn in their papers at the start of class on the due date noted in the course outline. 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 90 to 80, or from 75 to 65). I will not accept any papers turned in more than one week beyond the original due date.

Finally, you will find the following three sources *extremely* helpful as starting points for your research. Once you know your assigned district, photocopy its entry in the latest editions of *The Almanac of American Politics* and/or *Politics in America*. You will likely refer to this information throughout the semester.

<i>The Almanac of American Politics</i>	JK271 .A530 2010 edition in Reference Room Previous editions (1974-2008) in Tower 5
<i>CQ’s Politics in America</i>	JK1010 .P64 2010 edition in Reference Room Previous editions (1992-2008) in Tower 5
<i>CQ Weekly</i>	Available via UNCG’s Journal Finder at http://journalfinder.wtcox.com/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	15%
Midterm exam	20
Final exam	25
Paper assignments	<u>40</u>
	100%

The midterm, final, and paper assignments will be graded on the following 100-point scale.

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 is a relatively easy way to earn an “A” on 15% 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. 2008. *Congress and Its Members*, Eleventh Edition. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.

[H] Herrnson, Paul. 2008. *Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington*, Fifth Edition. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.

In addition, students will be required to read selected articles available on Blackboard. These articles are noted on the course outline by the author’s last name and an asterisk (*).

- **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://academicintegrity.uncg.edu/complete/>

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. If you have questions about the appropriate format for citations, make sure that you ask me before turning in the paper. The preferred citation style for this and all other political science classes is Turabian. You can find a guide to Turabian here, <http://library.uncg.edu/depts/ref/handouts/turabian.asp>. Follow the “Sciences System.” Finally, 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.

• **Deus ex machina: Not in this class**

In literature, the theater – and now, political science – a *deus ex machina* is any unlikely occurrence or device that magically resolves the difficulties or the seeming hopelessness of the plot – or semester. All the poor decisions leading to a story's climax are wiped away by an improbable intervention at the last moment. If you've ever read a book in which the heroine realizes that the horrors visited upon her were all just a dream, or watched a play in which the hero, facing disaster, is saved just before the curtain falls by some unlikely contrivance of the playwright, you're familiar with this literary gimmick. There will be no such last-second interventions in this class. My responsibilities to you include making my expectations transparent and treating you – and everyone else in the class – fairly. My responsibilities do not include wiping away your poor decisions with last second offers of extra credit available only to you. Such behavior on my part would be unfair to others in the class who worked hard enough to meet or exceed my expectations. There are no exceptions. Don't ask for one.

Course Outline

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignment
January 20	Introduction to the Course	Syllabus	
January 25 January 27	I. The Two Congresses A. The Evolution of Congress	D&O, ch. 1 D&O, ch. 2	Paper #1 assigned
February 1	B. Legislators' Goals & Responsibilities	D&O, ch. 5	
February 3 February 8 February 10	II. Process & Organization A. Process & Deliberation	D&O, ch. 8 Sinclair (1) * D&O, ch. 9	Paper #1 due
February 15 February 17	B. Leaders & Parties	D&O, ch. 6 Smith *	Paper #2 assigned
February 22 February 24	C. Congressional Committees	D&O, ch. 7	Paper #2 due
March 1	D. Unorthodox Lawmaking	Sinclair (2) *	
March 3	MIDTERM EXAM		

March 8 March 10	Spring Break		
March 15 March 17	III. Constraints on Congress A. The President	D&O, chs. 10 Conley *	Paper #3 assigned
March 22	B. The Bureaucracy	D&O, ch. 11	Paper #3 due
March 24	C. The Courts	D&O, ch. 12 Binder *	
March 29	D. Interest Groups	D&O, ch. 13	
March 31	Mandatory computer and data set instruction. (Crucial for completing final two paper assignments.)		Paper #4 assigned
April 5	D. Interest Groups, continued	Wright *	
April 7 April 12	IV. The Electoral Connection A. Rules of the Game	D&O, ch. 3 H, ch. 1 Cox *	Paper #4 due
April 14	B. The Decision to Run	H, ch. 2	
April 19	C. Campaign & Party Organizations	H, chs. 3 & 4	
April 21	D. Money in Campaigns	H, chs. 5 & 6	Paper #5 assigned
April 26	E. Campaign Strategy	D&O, ch. 4 H, chs. 7 & 8	
April 28	F. Winning & Governing	H, chs. 9 & 10 Erikson *	
May 3	V. Reform & the Two Congresses	H, ch. 11 D&O, ch. 16	Paper #5 due
May 5	Reading Day		
May 12	FINAL EXAM (Noon)		