

Political Science UN3222: The American Congress

Fall 2016

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:40–3:55pm

413 Kent Hall

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Office Hours: Tues./Thurs. 1:30–2:30pm & by appt.
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Government shutdowns. Near defaults on the U.S. debt. Fiscal Cliffs. The Speaker of the House resigning mid-term. And just when you thought events in the U.S. Congress could not possibly get any more tumultuous, we get the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump.

The turmoil and dysfunction that have characterized the Congress in recent years present challenges to those who seek to explain systematically how the institution operates. The rise of the Tea Party faction in the Republican caucus following the 2010 elections has been a driving factor in making recent congresses some of the most unusual and perplexing on record. Brinkmanship has become the new normal, resulting in 11th hour deals to avoid shutting down the federal government and defaulting on the national debt.

All of this has occurred against a backdrop of an uncertain recovery following one of the worst economic downturns in the history of the country and an increasingly tenuous international security situation. The failure of the federal government to address pressing problems has left many wondering, to put it nicely, whether members of Congress have the right priorities. Approval ratings of Congress have dipped to historic lows, as people express anger, frustration, and genuine puzzlement over what has become standard operating procedure in the national assembly.

The goal of this course is to help you understand how we have arrived at the current state of affairs and, more generally, the role that Congress plays in the political, economic, and social life of the people of the United States. How will members of Congress address the vexing economic, fiscal, and international security problems facing the United States? How will the presidential and congressional elections in 2016 affect the ability of members of Congress to work together to respond to the exasperation felt by those whom they are supposed to represent? In turn, how will their behavior and the general political and economic environment affect the outcome of the 2016 elections? What can we expect to see if the elections produce divided or unified partisan control of the Congress and presidency?

This course is designed to help you answer questions such as these. By systematically exploring issues of individual motivation, institutional structure and constraints, and the problems of collective decision-making, we will attempt to gain a thorough understanding of what is arguably the most important branch of the federal government and undoubtedly the most powerful legislature in the world.

Course Requirements

In addition to attending class *diligently*, you are required to write a midterm, a final exam, and an 8 to 10 page research paper. **We will not accept papers outside of these limits.** We will provide a list of paper topics that you can choose from. You are required to turn in a 1 to 2 page summary of your paper that includes a thesis statement, the general outline of your argument, and a preliminary list of sources. **We will not grade a paper unless the**

student has submitted a summary for it, nor will we grade any final drafts of the paper that do not have the original summary—with our comments—attached to it. Make copies of and/or scan the summary with our comments in case you lose the original. We will be happy to read portions of your paper during the writing process, but we will **not** read any drafts within one week of the paper deadline. **Unless a special exemption has been granted, the summary and final draft of the paper must be submitted in hard copy (i.e., not in electronic format).** The paper will account for 35% of your final grade, the midterm for 25%, and the final exam for 40%. Note the following dates relevant to the requirements:

- Midterm: October 20, in class.
- Summary of paper due: November 3, in class.
- Paper Due: December 8, in class.
- Final Exam: TBA.

Make-ups will not be given and late work will not be accepted except for reasons of certified medical necessity or family emergency.

Also note that POLS 1201: Introduction to American Government and Politics is a prerequisite for this course (POLS BC 1001: Dynamics of American Politics also satisfies this prerequisite; exceptions are possible for students with advanced placement credit).

Course Readings

Assigned readings are available from Book Culture, Lehman Reserves, and through CourseWorks. The articles assigned from *CQ Weekly (CQW)* and *Roll Call* can be accessed through CourseWorks. Articles from the *Oxford Handbook on Congress* are available through Oxford Handbooks Online.

Eric Schickler and Frances E. Lee. 2012. *Oxford Handbook on Congress*:
<http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio9286886>.

Roger H. Davidson, Walter J. Oleszek, Frances E. Lee, and Eric Schickler. 2015. *Congress and Its Members*. 15th ed. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer. 2016. *Congress Reconsidered*. 11th ed. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

Charles Stewart III. 2012. *Analyzing Congress*. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton.

Steven S. Smith, Jason M. Roberts and Ryan J. Vander Wielen. 2008. *The American Congress Reader*. New York: Cambridge.

In addition to the course readings, students should closely follow the activities of Congress in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, or some other reputable national newspaper. We will use CourseWorks to distribute assignments, additional readings, and make course announcements.

Course Outline

I have not included dates for the topics that we will cover in order to allow for maximum flexibility in the progress of the course. For example, the presidential and congressional elections will take place in the middle of the semester and, should we see a change in party majorities, some interesting fights may occur in the lame-duck session. It may be most fruitful to adjust the time we devote to various discussions in class as events unfold. I will announce in class what readings students should do each week.

I. Introduction

- Smith et al.: Chapter 1.
- Stewart: Chapter 1.
- Etheridge, “A Sharper Move to the Right,” *CQW*, Nov. 8, 2014, p. 11.
- Weyl, “The Tables Have Turned,” *CQW*, Nov. 6, 2014, p. 5.
- Scholtes, “New GOP Majority Risks Being ‘Captured’ By Senate,” *CQW*, Nov. 5, 2014.
- Weyl, “2016 Legislative Preview,” *CQW*, Jan. 4, 2016.
- “35 Issues to Watch,” *CQW*.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapter 38.

II. Historical and Institutional Background

- Davidson et al.: Chapters 1 and 2.
- Smith: Chapters 4 and 5.
- Stewart: Chapters 2 and 3.

III. Elections

- Davidson et al.: Chapters 3 and 4.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapters 4, 5, and 18.
- Smith et al.: Chapters 8, 9, 10.
- Stewart: Chapters 4, 5, and 6.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 7, 8, and 10.

IV. Congressional Institutions and Procedures

A. Committees and Subcommittees

- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 9.
- Smith et al.: Chapters 17, 18, 40 and 41.
- Stewart: Chapter 8.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 18 and 31.

B. The Floor

- Davidson et al.: Chapter 8.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 10.
- Smith et al.: Chapters 20, 21, 22, 26, and 27.
- Stewart: Chapter 9.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 19, 20, and 25.

C. Parties and Party Leadership

- Davidson et al.: Chapter 6.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapters 2, 7, and 8.
- Smith et al.: Chapters 15 and 16.
- Stewart: Chapter 7.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 17, 23, and 30.

V. Congress, the Executive, and the Courts

- Davidson et al.: Chapters 10, 11, and 12.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 11 and 15.
- Smith et al.: Chapters 28, 29, 30 and 34.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 34 and 36.

VI. Congress and External Pressures

- Davidson et al.: Chapter 13.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapters 3, 6, and 17.
- Smith et al.: Chapter 36
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 11, 15, and 16.

VII. Congress and Fiscal Policy

- Davidson et al.: Chapter 14.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapters 13.
- Smith et al.: Chapters 38 and 39.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 14 and 22.

VIII. Congress and Foreign Policy

- Davidson et al.: Chapter 15.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 14.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapter 35.

IX. Conclusion

- Davidson et al.: Chapter 16.