

GO 362
The Politics of Congress

Ron Seyb
Ladd 310
Ext. 5248

Office Hours:
Tu & Th, 2-4 PM
Spring 2011

Course Description

Few Americans would disagree with the statement that Congress is broken and in need of repair. Whether this view is based on members' propensity to engage in "scandalous" behavior-- ranging from sexual misconduct to financial improprieties to consorting with shady lobbyists who "do know Jack"-- or the institution's apparent failure to discover effective remedies for America's social and economic problems, the conclusion is the same: Congress must reform itself. Yet this widespread disaffection has not prompted members of Congress to alter the basic structures and procedures that have held sway in Congress for most of the twentieth century.

The 1994 congressional elections seemed to have broken this inertia and released pent-up energy for reform. The new Republican majority in the House prosecuted significant changes in the committee, staffing, and caucus systems. Change in the Senate was slower due to that chamber's propensity for conservatism and respect for minority rights, but the Republican majority managed to compel the Senate to address issues that it had shunned in the past (e.g., term limits, a balanced budget amendment, line-item veto authority for the president, the elimination of "unfunded mandates," welfare reform, etc.).

Many voters, however, were disappointed in the 104th Congress' performance. The modest achievements realized by the new Republican majority did not meet the expectations generated by the ambitious "Contract with America." Newt Gingrich, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, became a lightning rod for the public's anger about the Republicans' failure to end "politics as usual." Voters' dissatisfaction was registered in the 1996, 1998, and 2000 congressional elections, which saw the Democrats make gains in both the House and the Senate. The GOP rebounded in 2002 and 2004, expanding its majority in the House and gaining control of the Senate. This new "permanent majority" was, however, short-lived, as the Democrats' parlayed many Americans' disgruntlement with the lack of progress in the Iraq War into enough victories to re-capture control of both the House and the Senate in 2006.

The 2008 elections expanded the Democrats' majorities in both chambers. President Obama pledged to work with the Republicans in Congress. Keeping

this pledge has thus far been more difficult than keeping Charles Schumer in the “Cone of Silence.” The Republicans’ ability in both the House and the Senate to stay united and the protracted struggle for health care reform have been cited by many analysts as the principal reasons for the GOP’s success in the 2010 midterm elections, which were in many ways a reprise of the 1994 midterms. The current forecast is for more vitriolic partisanship and, consequently, more dysfunction. If this forecast proves to be accurate, then Congress will remain the protagonist in a Bronte novel.

This course will examine the forces that have traditionally limited the two parties’ ability to cooperate both to “fix” Congress and to achieve significant policy “change” (a term not used nearly enough in contemporary political debate). The course begins by tracing the roots of Congress’ poor public reputation to the so-called “reelection imperative,” which, purportedly, has led members to be overly responsive to their constituents’ parochial demands to the detriment of the public interest. The second part of the course will examine the argument that Congress has been organized to maximize members’ individual freedom at the expense of effective leadership and coherent public policy. The course will conclude with an assessment of Congress’s current status as seen against the discouraging backdrop of declining public confidence in the institution.

Course Requirements

The bulk of your final grade (40%) will be determined by your performance on a semester-long simulation of a Senate debate on repealing the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. The final 60% of your course grade will be distributed among the following exercises:

Midterm Examination (Thursday, March 10): 20%

Term Paper (Thursday, April 7): 20%

Final Examination (Monday, May 9): 20%

Attendance Policy

You are not allowed to miss any of the simulation events. Failure to attend an event will result in a **10% deduction** from your grade for the simulation.

You are allowed to miss four (4) classes. There are no excused absences. I do not grant excused absences for two reasons: (1) I just do not possess the

candle power to be able to discriminate between those illnesses, events, life changes, TLC programming shifts, etc. that are serious and those that are trivial; and (2) Four absences allow you to miss 2 weeks of class sessions without incurring any penalty. This is the most generous attendance policy since *Springtime for Hitler*. **I will treat tardies as absences.** I do often say significant things at the outset of class about readings, assignments, life coaching opportunities, slam poetry events, etc. It is hence important that you be at least physically present at 12:40 PM. Your mind belongs to you (though I would warn you that if you lack a conscience, then you belong on *Animal Planet*), but I do need at least to see you to feel that there is someplace I belong.

I will deduct 2% from your final grade for each absence over the 4 absence limit (e.g., a student who earns a cumulative score of "90" (A-) on the course assignments who compiles 5 absences will receive an "88" (B+) for the course).

If you reach four absences, I will send you an email alerting you that your next absence will cause me to deduct 2% from your course grade.

You should also keep in mind that according to the *Academic Information Guide*, "**any students who miss more than a third of the (class) sessions may expect to be barred from (the final examination). In such cases, the course grade will be recorded as F.**"

Laptops

Laptops are not allowed in class (I have looked deep into the heart of Facebook and I have seen my rotting soul). Students who have a disability that precludes them from taking notes with any instrument other than a laptop must provide me with documentation testifying to their "laptop needs" **by the end of the second week of classes.**

.

Books

The following books can be purchased at The Skidmore Shop for less than it costs to purchase a sample of Mitch McConnell's turtle DNA:

Earl Black and Merle Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans*

Julie Eilperin, *Fight Club Politics*

Paul Herrnson, *Congressional Elections*

Walter Oleszek, *Congressional Procedures and the Policy Process*

Important Note Pertaining to The Hodges Harbrace Handbook

All Government majors are now required to **own** a copy of the 17th edition of *The Hodges Harbrace Handbook*. Copies of the HHH can be found on the bottom shelf of the "Government" section at The Skidmore Shop. **If you do not yet own a copy, then you must purchase one for this course.** If you already own a copy, then you are more on point than is the E-Trade baby.

Weekly Topics and Reading Assignments

Note: an asterisk (*) denotes a reading to be distributed in class

Part I: Why Winning Matters

Week 1 (January 25-27): From Permanent Minority to Semi-Permanent Majority?

Readings: Eilperin, Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2

Week 2 (February 1-3): The Changing South and the New Republican Majority

Readings: Black and Black, Chapters 1, 7, and 11

Week 3 (February 8-10): The Persistence of Polarization

Reading: Eilperin, Chapters 3-7

Week 4 (February 15-17): Congressional Elections I: Launching a Campaign

Readings: Herrnson, Chapters 1 and 2

First Simulation Event: The Commerce Contretemps

TUESDAY, FEBRAURAY 15

Week 5 (February 22-24) Congressional Elections II: Raising Money

Readings: Herrnson, Chapters 4 and 5

*Thomas Mann, "Linking Knowledge and Action: Political Science and Campaign Finance Reform," *Perspectives on Politics*, 1(1) (March 2003)

*Reading on *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (TBA)

SIMULATION PAPER DUE

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24

Week 6 (March 1-3): Congressional Elections III: Winning Votes

Readings: Herrnson, Chapters 7 and 8

Part II: The Policy-Making Process

Week 7 (March 8-10): The Problem of Pork

Readings: *John Cochran, "Budget Villain, Local Hero," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly* (June 12, 2006)

*Jonathan Allen, "The Earmark Game: Manifest Disparity," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly* (October 1, 2007)

MIDTERM EXAMINATION THURSDAY, MARCH 10

SPRING BREAK

Week 8 (March 22-24) Lobbying Congress

Readings: *John Cochran, "The Influence Implosion," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly* (June 16, 2006)

*John Cochran, "Grass-Roots Advocacy: A New Medium for the Message," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly* (March 13, 2006)

Week 9 (March 29-March 31): The Committee System

Readings: Oleszek, Chapter 3

*David Rohde, "Committees and Policy Formulation," in Paul Kirk and Sarah Binder, *The Legislative Branch*

Second Simulation Event: Do the States Take it in the Neck? TUESDAY, MARCH 29

Week 10 (April 5-April 7): Party Leadership

Readings: *Barbara Sinclair, "Parties and Leadership in the House," in Paul Kirk and Sarah Binder, *The Legislative Branch*

*Steven Smith, "Parties and Leadership in the Senate," in Paul Kirk and Sarah Binder, *The Legislative Branch*

TERM PAPER DUE THURSDAY, APRIL 7

Week 11 (April 12-14): Rules and Procedures in the House of Representatives

Readings: Oleszek, Chapters 4 and 5

Week 12 (April 19-21): Rules and Procedures in the Senate

Readings: Oleszek, Chapters 6 and 7

**Third Simulation Event: The Cost of Care
TUESDAY, APRIL 19**

Part III: The Relativity of Irrelevance

Week 13 (April 26-28): The Twilight of Congress?

Readings: *Thomas Fleming, "The Imperial Congress," American Heritage (Fall 2010)

Week 14 (May 3): Review for the Final Examination

Readings: No Reading

**Final Simulation Event: Floor Statements
TUESDAY, MAY 3**

**FINAL EXAMINATION
MONDAY, MAY 9, 9:00 AM, LADD 106**