

GO 362
The Politics of Congress

Ron Seyb
Ladd 310
Ext. 5248

Office Hours:
M&W, 2:00-4:00 PM
Spring 2009

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 (though the size of the Democratic majority in the Senate remains "a big fat

mire”) President Obama has pledged to work with the Republicans in Congress. The signals from the GOP, however, have thus far been less than auspicious.

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 and the Bush administration’s promulgation of the “unitary presidency” understanding of the proper relationship between the branches.

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 health care reform. The final 60% of your course grade will be distributed equally between your performances on a term paper (30%) and an in-class final examination (30%). The final examination will be administered on a date selected by the touring company of *Macbeth* in the Registrar's Office.

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.

I will allow you **two (2) excused absences** from class. You must, however, provide me with your “transcendent excuse” **either before or on the day that you miss class.** If you know before the class meeting that you absolutely must miss that class (e.g., Roland Burris wishes to give you a tour of the inside of his mausoleum, your “clinical experience” has prompted Amy Winehouse to ask you to testify at her parole hearing, you are the “You” in *You, Me, and Dupree*, etc.), then inform me of your planned absence as early in the semester as possible. If you suddenly contract a terminal condition on Tuesday or Thursday morning (“scalp pain” is not terminal), then either phone or e-mail me **before 2:10 PM** or before you snap the mortal coil on that day, whichever comes first.

I will deduct 2% from your final grade for any unexcused absence after you have expended your two excused absences. **I will count tardies as unexcused absences.**

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 know how irresistible *Galley Slaves* is... believe me, I know). Students who have a disability that precludes them from taking notes with any instrument other than a laptop may petition me for a waiver from this prohibition. I will, however, be asking that *Eagle Eye* woman to monitor these students' screens.

Books

The following books can be purchased at The Skidmore Shop for less than it cost Richard Durbin for those "I'm with the Alpha and the Omega" t-shirts:

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*

Weekly Topics and Reading Assignments

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

Part I: Why Winning Matters

Week 1 (January 20-22): From Permanent Minority to Semi-Permanent Majority?

Readings: Eilperin, Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2

Week 2 (January 27-29): The Changing South and the New Republican Majority

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

Week 3 (February 3-5): The Persistence of Polarization

Reading: Eilperin, Chapters 3-7

*Eve Fairbanks, "Children of the Revolution," *The New Republic*
(December 31, 2008)

Week 4 (February 10-12): Congressional Elections I: Launching a Campaign

Readings: Herrnson, Chapters 1 and 2

First Simulation Event: You Cannot Stop Costs, You Can Only Contain Them

Week 5 (February 17-19) 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)

*Eric Lipton and Raymond Hernandez, "A Champion of Wall Street
Reaps the Benefits," *The New York Times* (December 14, 2008)

Week 6 (February 24-26): Congressional Elections III: Winning Votes

Readings: Herrnson, Chapters 7 and 8

Simulation Paper Due: February 26

Part II: The Policy-Making Process

Week 7 (March 3-5): 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)

Second Simulation Event: Cover Me

SPRING BREAK

Week 8 (March 17-19) 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)

*Martin Kady II, "Keeping Grass-Roots Lobbying under Wraps,"
Congressional Quarterly Weekly (March 26, 2007)

Week 9 (March 24-26): The Committee System

Readings: Oleszek, Chapter 3

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

*Veronika Oleksyn, "Seniority, Loyalty, and Political Needs Shape Makeup of Committees," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly* (April 11, 2005)

Term Paper Due: March 27

Week 10 (March 30-April 2): 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*

Week 11 (April 7-9): Rules and Procedures in the House of Representatives

Readings: Oleszek, Chapters 4 and 5

Third Simulation Event: The Health of the 401(k)

Week 12 (April 14-16): Rules and Procedures in the Senate

Readings: Oleszek, Chapters 6 and 7

Part III: The Relativity of Irrelevance

Week 13 (April 21-23): The Twilight of Congress?

Readings: *Noah Feldman, "Who Can Check the President?" *The New York Times Magazine* (January 8, 2006)

Week 14 (April 28): Review for the Final Examination

Readings: No Reading

Final Simulation Event: Floor Statements

FINAL EXAMINATION-- TBA