

GO 362
The Politics of Congress

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Office Hours:
W&F, 1:00-2:30 PM
Spring 2010

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 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.”

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 among the following exercises:

Midterm Examination (Thursday, March 11): 20%

Term Paper (Thursday, April 8): 20%

Final Examination (Monday, May 10): 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.

I will allow you **three (3) absences** from class. **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** (“My Wii Fit slowed my pulse rate” is not an excuse for anyone except Jenny McCarthy)

There are no excused absences. I will not count an absence only if I receive a note from the Office of Academic Advising telling me that you have

either been quarantined due to illness (or, of course, *Jersey Shore* proselytizing) or were compelled to leave campus.

When you reach three 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 (Hulu, pace Alec Baldwin, has not been sanctioned by the American Federation of Teachers as an “age appropriate educational technology”). 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 cost to purchase a copy of Martha Coakley’s memoir, *A Little Bleach Could Have Removed that Blood from his Sock*:

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 26-28): From Permanent Minority to Semi-Permanent Majority?

Readings: Eilperin, Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2

Week 2 (February 2-4): The Changing South and the New Republican Majority
Readings: Black and Black, Chapters 1, 7, and 11

Week 3 (February 9-11): The Persistence of Polarization
Reading: Eilperin, Chapters 3-7

Week 4 (February 16-18): Congressional Elections I: Launching a Campaign
Readings: Herrnson, Chapters 1 and 2

First Simulation Event: The Public Option and its Problems
THURSDAY, FEBRAURAY 18

Week 5 (February 23-25) 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
FEBRUARY 25

Week 6 (March 2-4): Congressional Elections III: Winning Votes
Readings: Herrnson, Chapters 7 and 8

Part II: The Policy-Making Process

Week 7 (March 9-11): 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
MARCH 11

SPRING BREAK

Week 8 (March 23-25) 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)

**Second Simulation Event: Cover Me?
THURSDAY, MARCH 25**

Week 9 (March 30-April 1): The Committee System

Readings: Oleszek, Chapter 3

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

Week 10 (April 6-April 8): 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 8**

Week 11 (April 13-15): Rules and Procedures in the House of Representatives

Readings: Oleszek, Chapters 4 and 5

Week 12 (April 20-22): Rules and Procedures in the Senate

Readings: Oleszek, Chapters 6 and 7

**Third Simulation Event: Baby, You Can Drive My Car But....
THURSDAY, APRIL 22**

Part III: The Relativity of Irrelevance

Week 13 (April 27-29): The Twilight of Congress?

Readings: *Jonathan Chait, "Why the Democrats Can't Govern," *The New Republic* (April 15, 2009)

Week 14 (May 4): Review for the Final Examination

Readings: No Reading

**Final Simulation Event: Floor Statements
TUESDAY, MAY 4**

FINAL EXAMINATION
MONDAY, MAY 10, 9:00 AM, LADD 207