

PSCI 3041: The American Congress

Spring 2009

Instructor: Josh M. Ryan

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Office Hours: Monday 1-3:30, Wednesday 1-3:30 and by appointment

Section 001: 10-10:50 MWF, HLMS 141

Section 002: 11-11:50 MWF, GUGG 205

Course Description

This course is meant to provide an advanced understanding of Congress. This means we will be covering not only the structure of Congress, what it does, and how it does it, but we will also be asking some pertinent questions about Congress and attempting to answer them. We will discuss Member motivations, how well Congress represents the interests of the public, and how Congress has changed over time. We will also be addressing some common questions and complaints about the modern Congress, including the lack of competition for seats, polarization, redistricting, the filibuster and pork. Each of these will be examined from a social science perspective. That is, we will not discuss these issues the same way the media or “pundits” do. Instead, we will take a more scientific approach.

The course is loosely organized into three sections. The first section of the class develops some basic social science tools that we will need to fully understand Congress. These include theories of rationality, and formal modeling. We will discuss how these assumptions apply to Members of Congress and its basic structure. We will next move into a descriptive analysis. This section includes a perspective on how Congress historically operated, how Congress makes laws, voting procedure, and interaction with other political actors. Finally, we will discuss some of the potential problems of the modern day Congress, and try to understand where Congress is going.

Because we will use rational choice theory to analyze Congress, there may be some differences between this class and other political science classes you may have had. Rationality broadly assumes that actors are utility maximizers. This means that we assume political actors have preferences, and they work to achieve those preferences within the constraints of the institution. Because this is an abstract model of Congressional action, this necessarily requires a little bit of math. The math allows us to make predictions of behavior based on some simple assumptions. This class will not have as much as some other political science courses or even other Congress courses. However, there will be some and you should be aware of it.

Reading

The course has one required textbook:

Smith, Steven S., Jason M. Roberts & Ryan J. Vander Wielen. 2007. *The American Congress*. Fifth edition. New York: Cambridge University Press.

The book is in the bookstore.

There will also be additional reading that will either be emailed or given out in class. Finally, you are required to read either the Washington Post or New York Times (both can be read online) as well as either politico.com, or thehill.com. All of these are free online, although for the Times and Post you have to register with an email address.

Course Requirements and Other Information

The prerequisite for this course is PSCI 1101. I will be enforcing this prereq strictly and will require you to drop the class if you have not already taken 1101. You will be administratively dropped after the third day if you have not taken 1101.

There is a wait list for both sections of the class. I cannot add you. You have two choices. Either drop the class or attend class and hope that enough other people drop that you will be administratively added. Also, if you do drop the class, make sure you drop it officially. If you simply stop attending, you will still be enrolled in the class and will still receive a grade.

The course is both lecture and discussion based. Some days will be mostly lecture, some days will be a mix, and some days will be mostly discussion. In general, parts of Friday's class will be reserved for discussing current events in the United States, and understanding how they relate to Congress and other political actors. This is one of the reasons it is important you read the newspaper and one of the other websites.

Readings are assigned for the week and should be completed by the start of the first class for the week (Monday). This ensures that you will understand more fully the lecture topics, and that you are able to engage with other students and myself. There are many things I will not cover that will be in the reading, or topics that I will assume you know already from which I will build on. Because there is a relatively light amount of reading, you will be expected to complete all of it.

There will be two midterms (see below). The tests will cover both the readings and lectures. Anything mentioned in class is fair game. This includes current events and any other topics discussed in class but not mentioned in the reading. If you miss one of the tests for any reason, you must notify me immediately or ahead of time. I will decide whether or not a make up exam is appropriate on a case by case basis. I reserve the right to refuse to give you a make up exam.

I will periodically send out emails to the class list. You are automatically subscribed to the list if you are enrolled in the class through your campus email account. The list will allow me to inform you of changes in assignments, the schedule or to attach additional reading. I cannot send emails out to a non CU email account. The CU email account is an official means

of communication between myself and the students. If you have any questions, please see <http://www.colorado.edu/policies/email.html> and/or talk to me.

Grading

There are five grades for this class: participation, two midterms, one final, and the paper.

Participation 20%

There is no attendance requirement for the class. If you miss a class for any reason, it is not necessary to tell me. You may miss as many classes as you wish. However, there are some costs to missing class. First, you will miss items that are discussed in class that will be on the test. Second, you will be graded on your participation. This means that you should be an active participant, asking questions in class of me, and discussing things with your fellow students. If you miss class you cannot participate.

Midterms, 2 @ 15% each

The format of both midterms will be short answer/identification and one essay response. The midterms are not cumulative. There will be constrained choice on the short answer and the essay (meaning you will have to answer 2 of 3 for example). There will be no multiple choice. The short answer/identification will be worth 50% of the test grade, with the essay worth the other 50%.

Final 25%

The format of the final will be the same as the midterms, but slightly longer. The final will be cumulative. As with the midterms, the short answer/identification section will be worth 50% of the test grade, with the essays worth the other 50%. The final is scheduled on:

001: Wednesday, May 6th, 7:30pm 10:00pm

002: Tuesday, May 5th, 7:30pm 10:00pm

Paper 25%

A research paper of approximately 15-20 pages will be due on Monday, April 20th in class. We will discuss the paper topics in class in a few weeks. A 1-2 page prospectus will be due on March 2nd. I will provide comments within the next week, after which you may schedule meetings with me as you see fit to discuss your paper further. This portion of the assignment is marked as either complete or incomplete. If you choose not to turn in a prospectus, you will be marked down one third letter grade on your final paper (i.e. from a B+ to a B, or B to B-.)

Misc. Grading Information

I will be happy to regrade anything with the understanding that the grade could be higher or lower than the original grade. In order to have me regrade something, you need to give me an explanation of your specific concerns within one week. As mentioned, the tests are short answer/identification format. I will give you a list of possible test questions about a week ahead of time. This will serve as your review sheet or study guide. For the test, I will select some of

these questions for the test. If you need to take the test ahead of time, you need to inform of the reason well before the exam. If you miss the test for any reason, you can take a makeup, but you should also inform me immediately. I will require documentation for early or late test-takers.

Schedule

Part 1 - This part of the course will serve as an introduction, and explain and justify certain assumptions.

Week 1 (Jan.12): Introduction, Basics of Congress

Reading: Smith et al., Chapter 1

Week 2 (Jan.19) (No class on Jan. 19): Rationality and Collective Action Problems

Reading: To be assigned

Week 3 (Jan. 26): Spatial Modeling and Constitutional Founding

Reading: Smith et al., Appendix

Constitution of the United States

Week 4 (Feb. 2): Constitutional and Historical Context

Reading: Smith et al., Chapter 2

Week 5 (Feb. 9): Member Goals and Strategies

Reading: Smith et al., Chapter 4

Friday, Feb 16.: FIRST MIDTERM

Part 2 - This part focuses on how Congress conducts its business.

Week 6 (Feb. 16)Legislating - Bills and Laws

Reading: Smith et al., Chapter 7

Week 7 (Feb 23): Legislating - Floor and Voting

Reading: Smith et al., Chapter 8

Week 8 (March 2): Committees - What They Do and Why

Reading: Smith et al., Chapter 6

Research Paper Prospectus Due, Monday March 2nd.

Week 9 (March 9): Congress and the President

Reading: Smith et al., Chapter 9

Week 10 (March 16): Congress and the Courts

Reading: Smith et al., Chapter 10

Friday, March 20: SECOND MIDTERM

Week 11 (March 23): No class, Spring Break

Week 12 (March 30): Congress and Interest Groups

Reading: Smith et al., Chapter 11

Part 3 - This section focuses on potential problems with the Modern Congress and its Future

Week 13 (April 6): Elections, Resources, Policy, and Pork

Reading: Smith et al., Chapter 3

Week 14 (April 13): Redistricting and Competition

Reading: To be assigned

Week 15 (April 20): Partisan and Polarization

Reading: None Research Paper Due, Monday April 20th.

Week 16 (April 27): The Next Two, Probably Four Years - Unified Democratic Control? Reading: Smith et al., Chapter 5

Other Information

Civility: Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Faculty has the professional responsibility to treat all students with understanding, dignity and respect, to guide classroom discussions and to set reasonable limits on the manner in which they and their students express opinions. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, culture, religion, politics, sexual orientation, gender variance, and nationalities. Please speak with me promptly if you feel there is a civility problem in the classroom. See policies at <http://www.colorado.edu/policies/classbehavior.html> and at http://www.colorado.edu/studentaffairs/judicialaffairs/code.html#student_code

Disability Accommodations: If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit to me a letter from Disability Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities. Contact: 303-492-8671, Willard 322, and www.Colorado.EDU/disabilityservices Disability Services' letters for students with disabilities indicate legally mandated reasonable accommodations. The syllabus statements and answers to Frequently Asked Questions can be found at: www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices

Religious Accommodations: Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to reasonably and fairly deal with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments or required attendance. See full details at: http://www.colorado.edu/policies/fac_relig.html A comprehensive calendar of the religious holidays most commonly observed by CU-Boulder students is at <http://www.interfaithcalendar.org/>

The University of Colorado at Boulder policy on Discrimination and Harassment:

(<http://www.colorado.edu/policies/discrimination.html>) The University of Colorado policy on Sexual Harassment and the University of Colorado policy on Amorous Relationships applies to all students, staff and faculty. Any student, staff or faculty member who believes s/he has been the subject of discrimination or harassment based upon race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, religion, sexual orientation, or veteran status should contact the Office of Discrimination and Harassment (ODH) at 303-492-2127 or the Office of Judicial Affairs at 303-492-5550. Information about the ODH and the campus resources available to assist individuals regarding discrimination or harassment can be obtained at: <http://www.colorado.edu/odh>

Honor Code: All students of the University of Colorado at Boulder are responsible for knowing and adhering to the academic integrity policy of this institution. Violations of this policy may include: cheating, plagiarism, aid of academic dishonesty, fabrication, lying, bribery, and threatening behavior. All incidents of academic misconduct shall be reported to the Honor Code Council (honorcolorado.edu; 303-725-2273). Students who are found to be in violation of the academic integrity policy will be subject to both academic sanctions from the faculty member and non-academic sanctions (including but not limited to university probation, suspension, or expulsion). Other information on the Honor Code can be found at: <http://www.colorado.edu/policies/honor.html> and at <http://www.colorado.edu/academics/honorcode/>

If you need to contact me or set up a time to meet outside of my regularly scheduled office hours, don't hesitate to speak to me after class or send me an email. I check my email at least once daily and usually multiple times per day. If you have questions or do not understand the material please come to my office hours prior to the day before the midterm, final, etc. For any other issues or questions you may have, please speak to me personally throughout the semester.