POLITICAL SCIENCE 324, THE CONGRESS
FALL 2020

Class: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:30-3:45, online

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My “office hours” will be held by appointment over Webex or phone. Email me to suggest several times that are good for you. I check email frequently and in general will respond quickly.

Course Focus

The U.S. Congress is the most powerful legislature in the world, but it is also widely viewed as very dysfunctional. Why? Is its awful reputation deserved? Can anything be done to improve the reputation of Congress and its actual performance?

You may have other questions about Congress. If you are interested in advancing a particular cause, you may want to know: How can I influence Congress? If you have paid attention to recent events, you may wonder: How well does the Congress deal with the President? And, if you are paying attention to the upcoming election, you know that many people are curious about who will control the Senate in 2021.

In trying to answer these questions and other important ones about Congress, we will draw on many public information sources, and on an enormous political science literature that is full of important findings. By the end of the semester, if you work hard in this course, you will have a strong understanding of the basics of the Congress and some of its complexities. You will know major theories about congressional structure and behavior, be aware of alternative methods of studying legislatures, and be able to follow the legislative process and perhaps even affect it.

A Special Semester

To state the obvious, because of the pandemic, this won’t be a normal semester. I am committed to making this online version of the course a successful variant of the face-to-face version I have taught before. Central to this will be approach is the expectation that all students will benefit from each others’ active participation.

This means that we will “meet” every week of the semester over Webex, sometimes on both Tuesdays and Thursday, and sometimes on one of those days. I will announce on the week prior
any classes that will be asynchronous; recorded lectures and discussion boards will be posted for those classes.

Given the nature of the times, I may want to or have to change the syllabus; if so, that will be announced on Blackboard.

Readings

There is one required text for purchase: Congress: The First Branch, by Sean M. Theriault and Mickey Edwards, Oxford University Press, 2020. Readings from this book are denoted as “TE” below. I particularly like this book because it has an accessible writing style, and because it was co-authored by a political scientist and a former Member of Congress. From personal experience, having worked in Congress for nine years, I know that being exposed to the different perspectives of academics and practitioners gives a more complete and accurate picture of Congress.

It is quite common for the U.S. Congress to be studied by itself rather than be compared to other national legislatures across the world. There are pros and cons to this approach. In this course, we will occasionally use a limited comparative method by comparing Congress to another legislature in the United States. This is the California legislature during the 1970s, which was the subject of an exceptional study written by William K. Muir: Legislature: California’s School for Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). This book is distinctive in how well it describes the virtues of that legislature at that time, which will serve as a comparator to the present Congress. The book is out of print, so I have scanned it to Blackboard. We will read only the first half of the book, but the rest is available on Blackboard.

The other required readings, including short news articles on current congressional issues, can also be accessed from the course Blackboard page.

Preparation and Participation Expectations, and Class Discussions

I expect that students will complete all required readings before class, “attend” class regularly, and participate in class. But I’m very aware that “life happens,” and will be appropriately flexible regarding assignment expectations if you are sick or have any other significant problems that interfere with your class performance. Please keep me informed if you can’t attend or you fall behind.

Participation in class discussions will be 22% of your final grade. Participation includes careful listening, speaking in discussions and contributing to discussion boards, and asking questions if you are confused.
We will use Webex for our class meetings, because it will allow all of us to see each others’ faces. That is, I would like all students to enable their video. Webex now allows you to blur your background or use a virtual one, if you prefer (click on “change background” when you start your personal room). To prevent audio feedback, mute your audio until you want to speak. Raising your hand will allow me to recognize you for speaking, or use the chat function, as long as it is not too distracting from the oral discussion.

Throughout the semester, we will follow the rules of academic freedom. I hope that you will express your values as strongly as you would like, and respect the rights of others to do the same. I will express my own views at times, and when you disagree, I encourage you to challenge my position; you should be absolutely confident that I will not penalize you.

The counterpart to this encouraged diversity of expressed opinions will be the academic exercise of analyzing our differences in reference to the concepts and methods covered in the course. My hope is that everyone--including me--will end the semester having reconsidered some beliefs in light of findings from research and the comments of each other.

Assignments

The remaining 78% of your grade will be a final paper and eight assignments throughout the semester; the percentage weight for each assignment is listed below. For two of the assignments, you will prepare short videos using VoiceThread, a user-friendly application that I will demonstrate in class. Five other assignments are short writing assignments. These assignments should be submitted by 10 a.m. the morning of class, using the Assignments tab on Blackboard. This will link to the UMBC Google Assignments site, where you can either submit a Google.doc, or attach a file in another format that is accepted by Google Drive.

The final within-semester assignment will be a partial draft of your final paper. For the final paper, I would like you to choose a policy issue that interests you; I must approve this issue by 10/15. Your task for this paper is to explain how Congress considered this issue in the 116th Congress (2019-2020) and predict how Congress might consider it in the next two years, with particular focus paid to the content we will cover in Part IV of the course. More information about the final paper will be provided on Blackboard.

For all writing assignments, follow the basic process for good writing: brainstorm, produce an initial draft, analyze how you might improve your piece, and then revise. Almost all good writing is the product of gathering accurate information and revising both substance and style. You should polish your paper by proofreading and copy editing before you hand it in. Honor the idea that “every word counts”; use the full space that you are allowed, but don’t waste that space with irrelevant or redundant material. I am indifferent to the style of citation that you use (APA, Chicago, etc.), as long as you use it correctly.
Any violations of academic integrity will be grounds for failing the course and will be reported to UMBC authorities. To avoid being charged with plagiarism, when you draw on readings other than required ones, you must cite them. If I find that you handed in work that you did not produce, you will fail the course. For more info, see my web page on plagiarism at: http://userpages.umbc.edu/~meyers/plag.htm.

Grading

I will return your writing assignments with comments, and grades will be posted on the Blackboard grade center. I will use a grade scale of A=8, B=6, C=4, D=2, F=0. When this scale is multiplied by the percentage weights for each assignment, you can earn 800 points over the semester. The points ranges for the course grade will be A=700-800, B=500-699, C=300-499, D=100-299, and F=0-99.

Class Schedule: Topics, Readings, and Assignments

Part I: Strong constitutional powers and weak institutional reputation

8/27 Class introduction; what do you think about how Congress is performing?


9/1 Alternative methods of studying legislatures; Muir’s model American legislature


Muir, pp. 1-36
9/3  A “Congressional system” of government

TE, preface, and pp. 3-39


Assignment 1 (5%), 2 pages: Considering the fight on the House floor about Pelosi’s words, to what extent do you think there should be expectations that legislators be polite in their speeches on the floor or committee? Relate your argument to one idea each from the Muir and TE readings.

9/8  Article I powers—core, delegated, challenged, obsolete

Read Article I, and watch any of the video clips on the CSPAN site that interest you.

9/10 Should proxy voting be allowed during the pandemic?


Assignment 2 (5%), two pages: Do you agree or not with Wallner that all legislators should be physically present in order to vote? Explain your reasoning.

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Part II: Representation

For this part of the course, and the next part, you will select from a provided list one Representative and one Senator to research for the assignments you will complete.

9/15 Delegates vs. trustees; member goals; introduction to VoiceThread

TE pp. 41-50; 115-120

9/17 Demographic and substantive representation

TE 109-115


Michele Swers, 2018. “2018 saw more women elected to Congress. Should we expect women to govern differently?,” LegBranch.org, November 19.


9/22 Concentric constituencies; home style

TE, pp. 50-54


9/24 Vote explaining

TE pp. 125-136


Assignment 3 (7%), Voice Thread assignment. Drawing on the sources listed below, prepare a short video using VoiceThread that illustrates how the two legislators you are researching have
either explained a vote or exhibited their home style in their constituency. Relate the example to a concept in the Fenno or Kingdon readings.

Recommended sources: the official web page of the legislator; the campaign web page of the legislator; the Congressional Record; media articles found through an internet search or through Lexis-Nexis Academic; and Twitter, Facebook, or another social media site.

9/29 Credit-claiming, advertising, position-taking; why the moratorium on earmarks?


10/1 Whose views are represented (part one)?

TE pp. 54-69, 137-139

Assignment 4 (10%), 5 pages: Based on information you find in the sources listed for assignment 3, compare the two legislators you are researching, using concepts from this section of the course. E.g., to what extent do they appear to be delegates or trustees? To what extent do they engage in credit-claiming and/or position taking?

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Part III: Congressional campaigns and elections; money, interest groups, and corruption(?)

10/6 Basics of Congressional elections and campaigns; 2020 election predictions

TE pp. 71-88, 93-107

Cook Political Report race ratings

10/8 House redistricting and gerrymandering


Assignment 5 (7%): This is a group assignment. Your group will pick a state, and choose your favorite map from among the eight options for the state. Justify your choice in the form of an op-ed for a state news site--no longer than 700 words.

10/13 Dialing for dollars

TE, pp. 88-93

Norah O’Donnell, 2016. “Are Members of Congress Becoming Telemarketers?,” 60 Minutes, April 24,

or


10/15 Differential access

TE, pp. 298-300


10/20 Whose views are represented (part two)?


Assignment 6 (7%), three pages: For the two legislators you reviewed for previous assignment, go to opensecrets.org and describe how they have financed their campaigns, based on the data you find there. Look also at the legislators’ personal financial disclosures. Would you change anything you wrote for the previous assignment? Why or why not?

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Part IV: Legislating in the textbook and current legislative processes

10/22 The effective California legislature of the 1970s and its effective legislators
   Muir chapters 2-4

10/27 The “textbook Congress”
   TE pp. 140-167

10/29 Committees
   TE pp. 211-241

11/3 Election day--no class

11/5 A legislative genius; distributive politics in the textbook Congress

11/10 Unorthodox legislating becomes the regular disorder
   TE pp. 169-209

11/12 Political parties in Congress; party cartels and conditional party government
   TE pp. 245-279

11/17 Defining and measuring legislator effectiveness
   Scan through Center for Effective Lawmaking website, including the “Understand Our Method” tab

11/19 Pivots and the gridlock interval; should the Senate kill the filibuster?

TE, pp. 317-320


Assignment 7 (10%): a draft of final paper

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Part V: Sharing powers with the President

11/24 Congressional reform; the budget process/power of the purse; staff agencies


12/1 Dealing with the chief legislator and commander in chief; the War Powers Act and the AUMF

TE, pp. 281-292


12/3  Oversight; confirmations
TE, pp. 292-298, 300-301


Senate Judiciary Committee oversight hearing on reunification of migrant families, 7/31/18, CSPAN

Instructions on how to clip CSPAN video

Assignment 8 (7%): Watch at least part of the oversight hearing. Create a VoiceThread, using clips from the hearing, that evaluates whether the advice given by Currie was followed by those testifying, and comment on the nature of the questioning by senators.

12/8  Final class--discussion of final papers

12/15  Final paper due at midnight