

The United States Congress

Political Science 4201

Fall 2009

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“The only difference between death and taxes is that death doesn't get worse every time Congress meets.” - Will Rogers

“Any one of the strange laws we suffer is a compromise between a fad and a vested interest.” - Gilbert Keith Chesterton

“The electors see their representative not only as a legislator for the state but also as the natural protector of local interests in the legislature; indeed, they almost seem to think that he has a power of attorney to represent each constituent, and they trust him to be as eager in their private interests as in those of the country.” - Alexis de Tocqueville

“Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.” - Edmund Burke

### **The United States Congress : Course Description**

Representation is a core concept in democratic governance. This course explores the relationship between what representation meant at the American founding and what it means now, as well as how the collective nature and institutional design of Congress affect the concept of representation and influence policy. The first unit of the course introduces the concept of representation and early ideas and concerns about the design of a bicameral, geographically-based legislature. We will read selections from the Federalist and Anti-Federalist papers, recent analysis of the effects of these designs, and arguments about descriptive representation.

The second unit examines contemporary congressional procedure. We will explore how the internal procedures of law-making have changed in the House and the Senate, with an eye toward the changing roles of party leadership, organized interests, committees, and the minority party.

The third unit turns back to the topic of representation through the lens of Congressional elections. This unit begins with an academic analysis of Congressional elections, assessing potential causes of incumbency advantage and effects of national political conditions on

Congressional elections. The academic analysis will then be compared with an on-the-ground account of one candidate's challenge against an incumbent representative.

The final unit considers the contemporary Congress in the context of the political system, and the other branches. We will read Mann and Ornstein's bipartisan critique of Congress and assess whether this critique is fair and whether their insights apply to the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress and beyond. Central to this discussion is an analysis of the relationship between the legislative and executive branches of government

### **Assignments and Expectations**

This is an upper-division course. In order to be successful, you will need to exhibit serious effort in class discussions - including being prepared for class by doing the readings - and in your written work.

All students are expected to abide by university standards for academic honesty. This includes proper citation of all sources. Anyone caught plagiarizing or cheating will be subject to punishment to the fullest extent of university policy. Please familiarize yourself with guidelines for academic honesty published in the *Undergraduate Bulletin*.

In addition to an in-class midterm and final examination, grades will be determined by class participation and a writing assignment. The breakdown is as follows:

Class participation: 10%

Analytical reading paper: 10%

Blogging Assignment (including blog review): 30%

Midterm: 20%

Final: 30%

### **Books**

Four books are available at the BookMarq for purchase:

Barbara Sinclair, *Unorthodox Lawmaking*

Gary C. Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*

Edward Sidlow, *Challenging the Incumbent*

Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *The Broken Branch*

## *Blogging Assignment*

This course is designated as “writing intensive” and you will earn that credit. Instead of a conventional term-paper arrangement, this semester you will create a political blog on [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com). The parameters of the assignment are as follows:

### *Quantity*

You will be required to make at least 7 blog posts (roughly once every two weeks, and I encourage you to follow that schedule or something like it). A blog post need not be more than three or four paragraphs, but it should be at least two. A paragraph contains at least two sentences. You must have two blog posts completed by October 10.

### *Content*

Developing the content of your blog is largely up to you. Given the nature of the course, the blog should focus on some aspect of Congress. Successful blogs will often choose a theme, rather than general commentary on Congressional activity. Some possible themes include: policy areas, like environmental policy, social policy, health care, civil liberties, trade (to name a few); interesting upcoming elections; a particular geographic area of the country; commentary from a particular political perspective.

The blog should attempt to analyze issues, not just spout off opinion. Part of the exercise of blogging is to combine your own perspective with fact and idea-based analysis. Here are some questions to consider as you write about current events:

What is unusual about this event?

How does this event compare with others like it in the past?

What are the public debates surrounding this issue or event? What are the two sides to the story?

What is the purpose of my blog and this post? Do I want to persuade an audience? Explain a particular phenomenon? Link two phenomena that are usually considered separate?

Reading political blogs can help you develop ideas for your own. Some good ones include:

[Redstate.com](http://Redstate.com)

[Fivethirtyeight.com](http://Fivethirtyeight.com)

[Firedoglake.com](http://Firedoglake.com)

[Columbia Journalism Review \(cjr.org\)](http://Columbia Journalism Review (cjr.org))

A directory of political blogs can be found at: <http://directory.etaalkinghead.com/>

### *Audience*

Part of writing a blog is developing an audience. Start with the obvious – friends and family. You are encouraged to have others read and comment on your blog. Although the internet is nothing if not a place in which people gather to say whatever comes to mind, you can only gain by reminding people that the blog is for a class assignment and your professor is reading.

The ultimate goal of this assignment is for you to produce a body of work that is incisive, engaging, and worth retaining. If you choose not to blog after the semester ends, then you might be able to use your posts as samples of short writing. But, unlike other types of class assignments, if you enjoy your blog, you can keep it going after the semester ends.

### *Deadlines and grading criteria*

October 9, 2 blog entries must be completed

December 12, all blog entries must be completed

Blogs will be graded on both content and style. Writing should conform to the highest standards of grammar, syntax, and spelling. Clarity is key. Sentences should be concise, declarative, and employ active voice.

### *Content*

Grading guidelines will give equal consideration to viewpoints across the political spectrum. Blogs should include analysis in terms of class topics, such as procedure, parties and party leadership, committees, electoral concerns, and inter-branch relations. Blogs not incorporating these topics will not receive high grades. Your blog should provide interesting and insightful commentary on current events and issues by placing them in a larger framework and considering possible explanations for contemporary phenomena. See “blogging guidelines and suggestions” for more information.

### **Schedule of Class Meetings**

September 1 - Introduction

September 3 - - No class

## Unit One: Representation and the Origins of Congress

September 8-10

For Tuesday's discussion:

“Gangs of D.C.” by Alec MacGillis, *Washington Post*, August 9, 2009

The United States Constitution (link on D2L), esp. Article I

The Federalist Papers, 51, 52, 53, 62, 63, 64 (link on D2L)

The Anti-Federalist Papers, 55-56 (link on D2L)

Recommended: The Anti-Federalist Papers, 57-58; “Our Unconstitutional Census,” John

S. Baker and Elliot Stonecipher, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 9, 2009

For Thursday's discussion: “Feinstein Right, Feingold Wrong,” Michael McGough, *Los Angeles Times*, August 17, 2009

Mansbridge, Jane. 1999. “Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent ‘Yes,’” *Journal of Politics*. (D2L)

## Unit Two: Procedures in Congress

**September 15-17-** Contemporary Congressional procedure

For Tuesday's discussion Sinclair, *Unorthodox Lawmaking*, Chapter 1, Chapter 2 up to pg. 23  
(read up to “Suspension of the Rules”)

For Thursday's discussion: Sinclair, 23-42

**September 22-24 -** Procedure continued – how do the House and Senate do business?

For Tuesday's discussion: “A Decade of Republican Control,” *Congress Reconsidered* (D2L)

For Thursday's discussion: Sinclair, 43-61 (read up to “The Senate Floor”)

**September 29-October 1 -** Senate continued, reconciliation

For Tuesday's discussion: Sinclair, 61-72

“Obstruction and Leadership in the United States Senate” *Congress reconsidered* (D2L)

For Thursday's discussion: Sinclair, 73-90

**Blog review due October 1**

**October 6-8**

Tues: Sinclair, 91-107

Thurs: Sinclair, 108-138

**October 13 -**

Sinclair, Chapters 9

Oct - 15 - no class, catch-up day

October 20 - Sinclair, Chapters 12-13; in-class midterm review

October 22 - Fall Break

October 27 - midterm

**Unit Three: The Politics of Congressional Elections**

October 29 - Jacobson, *The Politics of Congressional Elections*, Introduction and Chapter 3

November 3 - Jacobson, 138-148, 155-175 (read up to "House Elections")

November 5 - Jacobson, 175 (starting where you left off)-211

November 10 - Sidlow, Challenging the Incumbent, pg 1-57

November 12 - Sidlow, pg. 59-95

November 17 - Sidlow pg. 95-end

**Unit Four: Assessing Congress in the Political System**

November 19 - Mann and Ornstein, pg. 1-46

November 24 - Mann and Ornstein, pg. 47-64

December 2 - Analytical reading paper due,

Mann and Ornstein, 64-95

December 4 - M&O, 96-104

December 9 - M&O, 141-210

December 11 - M&O, 211- end

