

## Pol330: The U.S. Congress

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Course URL: <http://www.reed.edu/~gronkep/pol330-s02>

**Course Description:** The popular picture of large social institutions might be faceless, static organizations, inscrutable to outside observers. In fact, social institutions are, in some degree or another, constantly changing in response to their environment. This course will examine the *development and current state of America's preeminent political institution: the U.S. Congress*. I will talk about the “environment” of Congress in two main ways: external (mainly electoral) and internal (institutional procedures and inertia). The carriers of Congressional change turn out to be, not surprisingly, the members. Since Congress makes its own rules, we will talk about the *institution* of Congress as a product of the *goals and motivations* of the members. These two views of Congress—a 200 year old institution and a noisy aggregate of members—are the centerpiece of this course.

Our second theme this semester is *politics vs. policy*. I would like to tell you that the most efficient and most effective solutions to our social ills are embodied in the legislation that passes Congress, but that is often not the case. In fact, one can argue that political feasibility is just as important as the inherent worth of a particular policy proposal. Nothing can be “good” policy which has no chance of passing. This tension, between politics and policy, is one of the enduring features (and frustrations!) of Congress.

We examine Congress in four steps. First, we look at how members get to Congress and what our expectations are once they get there. What is the “job” of a member of Congress? We then turn to Congressional decision-making, first in committees, then on the floor. Who matters and how are decisions *really* made? Third, we trace changes in Congress in the 1980's, especially the seismic shifts after the 1994 Republican revolution. These changes, many actually beginning to be seen in the late 1970s, played themselves out through the Reagan and Clinton administrations, and explain a lot about the discontent that the public feels with Congress today. Thus our final question: can Congress govern, and if not, what are the alternatives?

The requirements for this class are

- Short assignments and class participation (20%)
- Two short research papers (5 page strict limit) (30%)
- In class midterm (20%)
- A take home guided essay final (open book)(30%)

The dates for the assignments are noted on the syllabus. The deadlines on the papers and examinations are strict.

The following books are available for purchase at the Reed College bookstore. There are multiple copies of each in library reserve:

- Birnbaum and Murray. *Showdown at Gucci Gulch*
- Deering and Smith. *Committees in Congress 3rd Ed.*
- Dodd and Oppenheimer. *Congress Reconsidered, 7th Edition*
- Jacobson. *The Politics of Congressional Elections 5th Edition*
- Cooper. *Congress and the Decline of Public Trust*
- Sinclair. *Unorthodox Lawmaking*

Oleszek *Congressional Procedures and the Policy Process* is recommended if you believe that you do not have sufficient background in Congressional procedures. There are multiple copies of this book at library reserve.

There are also reserve readings at the library (paper and e-reserve). There is one reading from the JSTOR system (<http://www.jstor.org>)—you should familiarize yourself with this invaluable resource.

**Current Events Requirement:** There is an important *current events* focus to this course. This will be reflected in the readings, in class discussion, and in your written assignments. I don't expect you all to become current events junkies. However, one of the most interesting aspects of Congress is its dynamic nature—membership, procedures, and policies are constantly in flux. What I hope to do is help you move beyond the typical journalistic approach to current events, showing you how scholarly approaches can help you understand the day to day workings of the institution. At the end, I hope this helps you become better citizens: better critics, better voters, and more nuanced observers of our political system.

Consequently, I strongly recommend that you subscribe to the *Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (I have also arranged for the library to receive a copy) and expect to talk about the content during class. You can get this delivered to your Reed mailbox for \$1.50 per week. I have subscription forms which I will distribute in class.

Besides the weekly, you may find these sources useful:

- *Congressional Quarterly's Weekly Digest* is **the** comprehensive guide to Congress. They have a very good website (<http://oncongress.cq.com>) but Reed does not subscribe.
- Lexis-Nexus *Congressional Universe* is the most useful electronic guide to Congress available at Reed. *You will need to learn how to use this database.*
- *The Almanac of American Politics* is a reference guide of sorts to members of Congress. This is at the reserve desk.
- *Roll Call* the “daily newspaper” of Congress. It's online site is pretty good: <http://www.rollcall.com>
- *National Journal* a very influential Washington weekly, widely read on the Hill, in the executive branch, and among interest groups and lobbyists.
- *Project Vote Smart* (<http://www.vote-smart.org>) provides a wealth of information on congressional candidates. Also see <http://www.opensecrets.org>.
- *U.S. House and Senate* have their own websites that are very informative. Their URL's are obvious: <http://www.house.gov> and <http://www.senate.gov>.

#### Course Plan

All readings are required, *except* readings from Oleszek. Dodd means from the Dodd and Oppenheimer reading.

1. Jan 22–Jan 24 ..... *The Founders Intentions*
  - *The Federalist Papers* (Interests) 47, 51, (House) 52-53, 55-57, (Senate) 62-63. Available online at the Library of Congress: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/const/fed/fedpapers.html>.
  - Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* p. 102-131 “The principle of distinction” (reserve and outside my office)
  - *Thursday Assignment* Go to *The Almanac of American Politics* and photocopy the page that describes your member of Congress. Be ready to discuss his performance as a representative of your districts' interests in class. Turn in this photocopy.
2. Jan 29 ..... *No Class*
3. Jan 31 ..... *A Spatial Analysis of the Founders' Design*
  - Charles Stewart III, *Analyzing Congress* Ch. 2 “The Constitutional Origins of Congress” (reserve and outside my office)
4. Feb 5 ..... *Congress Today*
  - Barbara Sinclair “The New World of U.S. Senators” (Dodd)
  - Dodd and Oppenheimer, “A House Divided: The Struggle for Partisan Control” (Dodd)

- Hibbing and Smith, “What the American Public Wants Congress to Be” (Dodd)
  - Oleszek, Chs. 1-2 (book on reserve)
5. Feb 7 ..... *Introduction to Congressional Procedures*
- Sinclair, Chs. 1-4
  - Thursday Assignment: Each student must bring in an article (photocopy, clipping, or on-line printout) describing a bill currently under consideration in Congress. Be ready to discuss the content of the bill and where it stands in the legislative process. Turn in the clipping in class.
6. Feb 12–Feb 14 ..... *Congressional Elections I: Careers, Context, and Redistricting*
- Jacobson, Chs. 1-2.
  - Charles Stewart, *Analyzing Congress* Ch. 4: “The Choices Candidates Make: Running for Office” (reserve)
  - David Canon, *Race, Redistricting, and Representation*, Ch. 1 “Black Interests, Differences, Commonality, and Representation” (reserve)
  - Thursday assignment: select one state and collect information on the state of redistricting in that state. Provide a brief typed one-page summary to be turned in after class.
7. Feb 19–Feb 21 ..... *Congressional Elections II: Campaigning, Casework, Money*
- Jacobson Chs. 3-4
  - Herrnson, “The Money Maze: Financing Congressional Elections” (Dodd)
  - Richard Fenno, “U.S. House Members in Their Constituencies: An Exploration” (JSTOR)
  - Thursday assignment: Examine a sitting Senator or a House member from your chosen state and examine their two most recent campaigns. How much money did they raise and from where? What percentage of the vote did they receive? You may find <http://www.opensecrets.org>, <http://www.fec.gov>, Project Vote Smart, and the *Almanac of American Politics* useful sources. Type up a brief report (one page) and turn it in.
8. Feb 26–Feb 28 ..... *Congressional Elections III: Voter Choice, Incumbency Advantage*
- Jacobson, Chs. 5-6
  - Erikson and Wright, “Voters, Candidates, and Issues in Congressional Elections” (Dodd)
  - Cooperman and Oppenheimer, “The Gender Gap in the House of Representatives” (Dodd)
  - Fiorina, “Keystone Reconsidered” (Dodd)
9. Mar 5–Mar 7 ..... *Consequences of the Congressional Elections System*
- Jacobson, Chs. 7–8
  - Sinclair, Ch. 6
  - Fiorina, “Keystone Reconsidered” (Dodd)
  - Dodd and Oppenheimer, “Congress and the Emerging Order: Assessing the 2000 Elections.” (Dodd)
  - **First Paper Assignment Due: Member Evaluation**
10. Mar 19 ..... *Committees in Congress I: Theories*
- Deering and Smith, Ch. 1
  - Groseclose and King, “Committee Theories Reconsidered” (Dodd)
11. Mar 21 ..... *In Class Midterm*
- Be caught up on reading by today; review the first half of the semester

12. Mar 26 ..... *History of the Committee System*
  - Canon and Stewart, “The Evolution of the Committee System in Congress” (Dodd)
  - Deering and Smith, Ch. 2
13. Mar 28..... *Members and Committees*
  - Deering and Smith, Chs. 3-5
  - Evans, “Committees, Leaders, and Message Politics” (Dodd)
  - Oleszek, Ch. 4
14. Apr 2..... *Introduction to Congressional Research: Tracking Legislation in Congress*
  - Special meeting in library. Instructor provided handouts.
15. April 4 ..... *Congressional Legislation in Action I*
  - Sinclair, Chs. 7-12
  - Oleszek, Chs. 5-8
  - Thursday Assignment: Choose a policy area that you are interested in. Do a brief review on Congressional Universe about recent congressional activities in this area. Identify a recent piece of legislation that you would like to report on. Bring a brief one page printout or write up to class to turn in.
16. April 9 ..... *Congressional Legislation in Action II: Budget Policy*
  - Sinclair, Chs. 5, 11
  - Oleszek, Ch. 3
17. April 11–April 16 ..... *Congressional Legislation in Action III: The 1986 Tax Reform Act*
  - Birnbaum and Birnbaum, complete book
  - Thursday (April 11) Assignment: Make a one page timeline for your chosen piece of legislation (from introduction, committee consideration, floor consideration, to passage). Bring this to class.
18. April 18 ..... *Public Attitudes Towards Congress*
  - Cooper, Chs. 1-4
19. April 23-25 ..... *Conclusions: Understanding a Changing Institution*
  - Cooper, Chs. 7 and Epilogue
  - Cooper, “The Twentieth Century Congress” (Dodd)
  - Dodd, “Re-Envisioning Congress: Theoretical Perspectives on Congressional Change.”
  - Sinclair, Ch. 12
  - Review Jacobson, Ch. 8
  - **Second Paper Assignment Due: Congressional Legislative Report**