Congress as an Insititution

Fall 2019

Tues., 12:30 pm - 3:15 pm
Harkness Hall, rm. 329

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Course Overview

This seminar will provide students with the necessary historical background and methodological tools to conduct original research on the US Congress. The course emphasizes how Congress as an institution provides structure that scholars must embrace – and from which they may often benefit – when applying the more abstract concepts and techniques of political economy.

Responsibilities & Evaluation

Each student will be responsible for robust in-class participation (reflective of thorough preparation) throughout the semester as well as a term paper. We expect all students to come to class having read the week’s assignments, ready to engage in thoughtful and critical discussion. In order to facilitate this, we ask students to produce a written treatment (see below for details) each week of one of the assigned readings for that session. The expectations for these write-ups as well as the final paper will depend upon the training of each student. Participation will count for 20% of the course grade and...
will be based on the quality, not quantity, of a student’s contribution to the discussion. The weekly write-ups (specifically, the best nine of them, i.e., you may miss four weeks) will count for 40% of the grade. The term paper will count for the remaining 40% of the student’s grade for the course.

**Weekly Write-ups**

We ask each student come to class ready to hand in a 2-3 page, double-spaced, response piece to one or more of the assigned readings for that week. This should take the form of (a) a referee report (see attached example) or (b) a short, original, evidence-based investigation/extension related to one of the studies. We encourage students with data/statistics training to download the relevant datasets and perform some analyses of their own. Finding and working with datasets is one of the first steps for those seeking to produce cutting-edge research on the U.S Congress. This second approach, however, may also include locating and engaging with pertinent primary source material. Indeed, novel sources of evidence often distinguish cutting-edge research from derivative research. You must try each approach at least three times, and we encourage you to have some fun with approach (b)!!!

**Term Paper**

From first-year graduate students, we seek a well-developed research proposal accompanied by some preliminary analyses.

Graduate students in the second year and beyond will be expected to produce something closer to a complete first-draft of an original research paper.

Expectations of undergraduates will vary by student and be decided upon jointly by the student and (at least one of) the professors, but it will likely take the form of an approximately 15-page paper, double-spaced, not including title page or references.

**Course Goals**

We would like students to take away the concrete knowledge of how parties, committees, leaders, and rules serve as and themselves shape institutions, as well as how the interactions among them have changed historically. Further, students should appreciate the key differences between the House and the Senate. Beyond this, the course is roughly structured around five overarching themes/questions:
1. The Fundamental Question of Deliberative Bodies – How do the rules of the game, i.e., institutions, allow for the existence of equilibria? What are the properties of those equilibria?

2. Endogeneity of Institutions – Under what conditions do the rules of the game change?

3. Collective Action – How do coalitions overcome the challenge of collective action, both in day-to-day legislating and in seeking reform?

4. Studying Legislators – What can/can’t we learn from legislators’ actions in Congress? Do we have other options?

5. Understanding the Modern Congress in Historical Context – What “Congress” are we in now?

Outline of course and weekly readings

The Textbook Congress and the “New” “Classics”

Sept. 3 – The Institutionalist Approach to Studying Deliberative Bodies


Sept. 10 – Committees? Parties? None of the Above?


### Congressional Reform

**Sept. 17 – Leaving the “Textbook Congress”**


**Sept. 24 – Race and Congress**


**Oct. 1 **No Class – Rosh Hashanah

Set up a meeting for later in this week with one of the professors to discuss idea for term paper.

### Sizing Up the Senate

**Oct. 8 – Filibusters and more!**


• Gamm, Gerald and Steven S. Smith. “Arthur Pue Gorman and the Origins of Senate Floor Leadership, 1890-1913.” In *Emergence of Senate Party Leadership*, chapter 5.
Oct. 15  No Class - Fall Break

Set up a meeting for later in this week with one of the professors to review a couple-page outline/plan/sketch of the project.

Oct. 22 – Johnson and the Senate


Oct. 29 – Beyond the Filibuster (and an example of applying Pivotal Politics)


Theories of Lawmaking

Nov. 5 – Pivotal Politics and Responsible/Conditional Party Government Get Sent to Reconciliation


Nov. 12 – Distributive Politics and Vote Buying


Nov. 19 – Empirical Validation for Theories of Lawmaking


Partisan Era

Nov. 26 – How do we know we’re polarized, or What can(’t) we learn from legislators’ actions?


Dec. 3 – Partisanship and Polarization


Dec. 10 – Partisanship w/o Polarization?


Be prepared to provide an informal discussion of your term paper during this session, as well.