

Political Science W3322: The American Congress

Fall 2008

Tues. and Thurs., 1:10–2:25pm

517 Hamilton Hall

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As the 2008 election season heats up, the United States finds itself in a tenuous position at home and abroad. The housing crisis and sky-rocketing fuel prices appear to be wreaking havoc on the economy, and some economists are predicting a protracted period of recession. Although the situation appears to be less volatile in Iraq, other new trouble spots in the world have cropped up. Continued instability in Afghanistan, political turmoil in Pakistan, and a renewed assertiveness by Russia toward neighboring nations mean that the United States faces no shortage of challenges in the realm of foreign policy. It is not surprising then that recent polls indicate that about three-fourths of Americans think the country is on the wrong track.

The Democrats have the best opportunity to assume unified control of the federal government since 1992. Pundits are predicting large gains for Democrats in both the House and Senate, and if Barack Obama wins the presidency he will in theory have enough kindred spirits in Congress to produce substantial changes in federal policy on both the foreign and domestic fronts. If John McCain wins the presidency, it is likely that Washington will face an extended period of gridlock at a time when many are calling for significant change in the course of the nation.

How will the current political and economic environment affect the 2008 election and the work that remains for the 110th Congress? If the Democrats do win the presidency and increase their majorities in the Congress, how will they use their control of the executive and legislative branches to address the many and deep problems the country is currently facing? Will an Obama presidency lead to a period of post-partisanship as promised, or will the polarization that currently exists between Democrats and Republicans continue to vex members of Congress who seek to move the country forward? If McCain is elected, will he attempt to reprise the role that he has occasionally played as a Senator by reaching across party lines to forge bipartisan agreements to produce policy innovation? Or will he try to maintain the status quos established by the Bush Administration in the face of Democratic majorities in Congress?

The goal of this course is to help you answer questions such as these. By exploring issues of individual motivation, institutional structure and constraints, and the problems of collective decision-making we will attempt to gain a thorough understanding of what is arguably the most important branch of the federal government.

Course Requirements

In addition to attending class diligently, you are required to write a midterm, a final exam, and an 8 to 10 page paper. I will provide a list of paper topics that you can choose from. You are required to turn in a 1 to 2 page summary of your paper that includes a thesis statement, the general outline of your argument, and a preliminary list of sources. Students are strongly

encouraged to use Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* as a guidebook for their writing (this book is available in just about any book store and can also be accessed over the Web at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>). The paper will account for 35% of your final grade, the midterm for 25%, and the final exam for 40%. Note the following dates relevant to the requirements:

- Midterm: October 16.
- Summary of paper due: October 30, in class.
- Paper Due: December 4, in class.
- Final Exam: TBA

Make-ups will not be given and late work will not be accepted except for reasons of certified medical necessity or family emergency.

Also note that POLS W1201 is a prerequisite for this course (exceptions are possible for students with advanced placement credit).

Course Readings

Assigned readings are available from Book Culture, College Reserves, and through *CQ.com*, an online service accessible at <http://cq.com>. The articles assigned from *CQ Weekly (CQW)* can be accessed through *CQ.com* by going to the *CQ Weekly* page and searching on the page number, author, or date of the article.)

Roger H. Davidson, Walter J. Oleszek, and Frances E. Lee. 2008. *Congress and Its Members*. 11th ed. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer. 2005. *Congress Reconsidered*. 8th ed. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

Charles Stewart III. 2001. *Analyzing Congress*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Herbert F. Weisberg, Eric S. Heberlig, and Lisa M. Campoli. 1999. *Classics in Congressional Politics*. New York: Longman.

The Weisberg et al. book is out of print, but used copies are available online. Numerous copies of the chapters are on reserve.

In addition to the course readings, students should closely follow the activities of Congress in *The New York Times* (or some other reputable national newspaper) and *CQW*. I have set up a Web site that contains numerous links to sites that are relevant to this course, including sites that will help you stay on top of current events. The URL is <http://www.columbia.edu/~gjw10/w3322.html>. Students should also check the site regularly for course announcements.

Course Outline

I have not included dates for the topics that we will cover in order to allow for maximum flexibility in the progress of the course. For example, given that it is an election year, we may want to spend more time on the Elections section. I will announce in class what readings students should do each week.

I. Introduction

- Weisberg et al.: Chapter 1.
- Stewart: Chapter 1.
- Richert, “Moderates Come Front and Center”, *CQW*, July 28, 2008, p. 2044.
- Benenson, “Election 2008: With Enemies Like These ...”, *CQW*, April 28, 2008, p. 1086.
- Nather, “A Crisis of Confidence in Congress”, *CQW*, Oct. 22, 2007, p. 3060.
- Epstein and Jansen, “Role Reversal Yields Stalemate”, *CQW*, Jan. 7, 2008, p. 18.

II. Historical and Institutional Background

- Davidson & Oleszek: Chapters 1 and 2.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 16.
- Stewart: Chapters 2 and 3.

III. Elections

- Davidson & Oleszek: Chapters 3 and 4.
- Weisberg et al.: Chapters 8, 10, and 11.
- Stewart: Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

IV. Congressional institutions and procedures

A. Committees and Subcommittees

- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 11.
- Weisberg et al.: Chapters 16 and 19.
- Stewart: Chapter 8.

B. The Floor

- Davidson & Oleszek: Chapter 8.
- Weisberg et al.: Chapters 24, 25, and 27.
- Stewart: Chapter 9.

C. Parties and party leadership

- Davidson & Oleszek: Chapter 6.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapters 8, 9, and 10.
- Stewart: Chapter 7.

V. Congress, the Executive, and the Courts

- Davidson & Oleszek: Chapters 10, 11, and 12.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 13.

VI. Congress and External Pressures

- Davidson & Oleszek: Chapter 13.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 5.

VII. Congress and Fiscal Policy

- Davidson & Oleszek: Chapter 14.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 14.
- Weisberg et al.: Chapter 17.

VIII. Congress and Foreign Policy

- Davidson & Oleszek: Chapter 15.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 15.

IX. Conclusion

- Davidson & Oleszek: Chapter 16.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapters 2 and 18.