

# Political Science W3322: The American Congress

Fall 2009

Tues. and Thurs., 1:10–2:25pm

310 Fayerweather

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We are currently in a unique moment in American history as the country weathers the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. While some signs point to an economic recovery, considerable uncertainty exists about whether the recovery is real, what kind of recovery it will be, and how long it will be before the country is firmly on the path to economic growth.

The federal government and the U.S. Congress, which bear some responsibility for the creation of the crisis, have been active in responding to the downturn, enacting and implementing policies that seem to have prevented the worst case scenario. But substantial work lies ahead as the Democrats try to bolster the recovery and move forward on key agenda items in the face of concerted opposition by a recently emboldened Republican minority. Political discussion and debate in the nation in the next few months will be dominated by health care reform. Congress has played a central role in reform efforts up to this point, as President Obama has essentially delegated the task of formulating a reform bill to the legislative branch. This promises to be an epic legislative battle that will have a tremendous impact on the course of the nation and help to define political discourse for many years to come.

Internationally, the United States faces no shortage of challenges in the realm of foreign policy, as our military focus shifts from Iraq to Afghanistan and (a potentially nuclear) Iran, as we seek to repair frayed relations with long-standing allies, and as we work with other nations to address continued global economic instability and other important issues such as climate change.

How will the current political and economic environment affect the work that remains for the first session of the 111th Congress? Will the Democrats be effective in using their control of the executive and legislative branches to address the many and deep problems that the nation is currently facing? Will President Obama lead us into a period of post-partisanship as he 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? How will the success or failure of key Democratic initiatives affect their ability to maintain unified control of the federal government? Will the Republicans be effective in the role of the opposition party, thereby positioning themselves to make electoral gains in both chambers in the 2010 elections?

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 and the most powerful legislature in the world.

## 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. **We will not accept papers outside of these limits.** 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. **We will not grade a paper unless the student has submitted a summary for it, nor will we grade any final drafts of the paper that do not have the original summary (with our comments) attached to it.** 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/>). **Unless a special exemption has been granted, the summary and final draft of the paper must be submitted in hard copy (i.e., not in electronic format).** 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 22.
- Summary of paper due: October 29, in class.
- Paper Due: December 10, 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, Lehman 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. Free access to the site is available from any Columbia IP address or by logging on through the library's Databases Web page.

Roger H. Davidson, Walter J. Oleszek, and Frances E. Lee. 2010. *Congress and Its Members*. 12th ed. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer. 2009. *Congress Reconsidered*. 9th 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/~gju10/w3322.html>. We will use Courseworks to distribute assignments, additional readings, and make 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 the debate concerning the landmark effort to reform health care policy is likely to peak during the semester, we may want to devote a significant amount of time to discussing it in class as events unfold. I will announce in class what readings students should do each week.

### I. Introduction

- Weisberg et al.: Chapter 1.
- Stewart: Chapter 1.
- Nather, “Obama’s Next Task: Quick Rise to a Steep Challenge,” *CQW*, Nov. 10, 2008, p. 2960
- Ota, “Leadership Battles Break Out in House,” *CQW*, Nov. 10, 2008, p. 2998.
- Jansen, “No Magic Number in Senate, But More Muscle,” *CQW*, Nov. 10, 2008, p. 2976
- Nather, “A Liberal Dose of Disappointment,” *CQW*, Sept. 7, 2009, p. 1946

### 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.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapters 4 and 18.
- 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 10.
- 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 7, 8, and 9.
- Stewart: Chapter 7.

## **V. Congress, the Executive, and the Courts**

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

## **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 12.
- Weisberg et al.: Chapter 17.

## **VIII. Congress and Foreign Policy**

- Davidson & Oleszek: Chapter 15.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 14.

## **IX. Conclusion**

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