

Political Science W3322: The American Congress

Fall 2011

Tues. and Thurs., 1:10–2:25pm
602 Hamilton Hall

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The 112th Congress has been something of a roller coaster ride. The tone of the congress was set when the Republican party made record gains in the 2010 elections, recapturing control of the House of Representatives and narrowing the seat gap with Democrats in the Senate. Many of the newly elected representatives were affiliated with the Tea Party faction of the GOP, an anti-tax and generally anti-federal government movement that promised to make fundamental changes to the way that Washington operates. While such promises are perennially made but rarely kept, the Capitol has certainly been shaken up by its current inhabitants.

In April of this year, Congress and the president narrowly averted a shutdown of the federal government with an 11th hour budget deal. Then in August, Congress brought the country to the brink of default because of deep disagreements over legislation to increase the debt ceiling. Despite reaching a short-term legislative solution, the United States lost its Triple A credit rating for the first time in its history. All of this occurred against a backdrop of continuing economic stagnation, painfully high unemployment, and a wildly fluctuating stock market, which left many wondering whether members of Congress had the right priorities. Approval ratings of Congress dipped to historic lows, as people expressed anger, frustration, and genuine puzzlement over what was going on in the national assembly.

The goal of this course is to help you understand why these recent events played out in the way that they did and, more generally, the role that Congress plays in the political, economic, and social life of the people of the United States. How will members of Congress address the vexing economic and fiscal problems facing the United States? How will the so-called “super committee” established to produce solutions to the country’s deficit problems operate? Will it be successful? How will the impending elections in 2012 affect the ability of members of Congress to work together to respond to the exasperation felt by those whom they are supposed to represent? In turn, how will their behavior and the general political and economic environment affect the outcome of the 2012 elections?

This course is designed to help you answer questions such as these. By systematically 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. Make copies of the summary with our comments in case you lose the original.** We will be happy to read portions of your paper during the writing process, but we will **not** read any drafts within one week of the paper deadline. **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 20.
- Summary of paper due: November 3, in class.
- Paper Due: December 8, 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: Introduction to American Government and Politics is a prerequisite for this course (POLC BC 1001: Dynamics of American Politics satisfies this prerequisite; 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 CourseWorks or through *CQ.com* by going to the *CQ Weekly* page and searching on the page number, author, or date of the article (make sure that you are searching in the correct congress). 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. 2011. *Congress and Its Members*. 13th 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/~gjl10/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 fight over deficit reduction will heat up 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.
- Schatz, “The Trials Ahead for John Boehner,” *CQW*, Nov. 8, 2010, p. 2520.
- Ota, “The House: New Majority, New Challenges,” *CQW*, Nov. 8, 2010, p. 2528.
- McArdle, “GOP Makes Record Gains In Recapturing a Majority,” *CQW*, Nov. 8, 2010 p. 2547.
- Friel, “Tighter Margin, Greater Pressures,” *CQW*, Nov. 8, 2010 p. 2552.
- Barbash and Cohen, “Summer of Strife,” *CQW*, Aug. 8, 2011, p. 1736.
- Schatz, “A Deal in Which Nobody Wins,” *CQW*, Aug. 8, 2011, p. 1740.
- Schatz, “Debt Deal Brings Relief, Frustration,” *CQW*, Aug. 8, 2011, p. 1756.

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.