

Political Science W3322: The American Congress

Fall 2012

Tues. and Thurs., 1:10–2:25pm

702 Hamilton Hall

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Office Hours: Tues. and Thurs. 11am–12pm and by appt.

The 112th Congress has been something of a roller coaster ride, presenting challenges to those who seek to explain systematically how the institution operates. 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, it is without question that the influx of these new members has helped to make the 112th Congress one of the most tumultuous on record.

In April of 2011, 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. A major part of that deal was the imposition of automatic spending cuts of \$1.2 trillion evenly divided between defense and non-defense spending, which will begin to take effect on January 2, 2013 unless an alternative deal for deficit reduction is reached. All of this has occurred against a backdrop of continuing economic stagnation, painfully high unemployment, and general fiscal uncertainty, which has left many wondering whether members of Congress have the right priorities. Approval ratings of Congress have dipped to historic lows, as people express anger, frustration, and genuine puzzlement over what was going on in the national assembly.

The goal of this course is to help you understand how we have arrived at the current situation 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 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? What can we expect to see if the elections produce divided or unified partisan control of the Congress and presidency?

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 undoubtedly 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 18.
- Summary of paper due: November 1, in class.
- Paper Due: December 6, in class.
- Final Exam: December 18, 1:10–4pm (tentative).

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 (POLS BC 1001: Dynamics of American Politics also 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 CourseWorks. The articles assigned from *CQ Weekly (CQW)* and *Roll Call* can be accessed through CourseWorks. Articles from the *Oxford Handbook on Congress* are available through Oxford Handbooks Online.

Eric Schickler and Frances E. Lee. 2012. *Oxford Handbook on Congress*:
<http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio9286886>.

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. 2011. *Analyzing Congress*. 2nd ed. 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. Copies of the chapters are available through CourseWorks and on reserve. All of the readings from the *Oxford Handbook* are suggested, not required.

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 presidential and congressional elections will take place in the middle of the semester and the fight over deficit reduction may heat up in a lame-duck session, we may want to adjust the discussion 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.
- Oliveri, “Wiggle Room for Cuts?,” *CQW*, Aug. 6, 2012, p. 1610.
- Cranford, “This Game Is Far From Over,” *CQW*, Aug. 6, 2012, p. 1608.
- Rothenberg, “House Overview: Redistrictings Bottom Line New Maps a Wash in Terms of Partisan Gains,” *Roll Call*, March 16, 2012.
- Trygstad, “Senate Overview: Danger—Primaries Ahead,” *Roll Call*, March 16, 2012.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapter 38.

II. Historical and Institutional Background

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

III. Elections

- Davidson et al.: Chapters 3 and 4.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapters 4 and 18.
- Weisberg et al.: Chapters 8, 10, and 11.
- Stewart: Chapters 4, 5, and 6.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 7, 8, and 10.

IV. Congressional Institutions and Procedures

A. Committees and Subcommittees

- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 10.
- Weisberg et al.: Chapters 16 and 19.
- Stewart: Chapter 8.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 18 and 31.

B. The Floor

- Davidson et al.: Chapter 8.
- Weisberg et al.: Chapters 24, 25, and 27.
- Stewart: Chapter 9.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 19, 20, and 25.

C. Parties and Party Leadership

- Davidson et al.: Chapter 6.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapters 7, 8, and 9.
- Stewart: Chapter 7.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 17, 23, and 30.

V. Congress, the Executive, and the Courts

- Davidson et al.: Chapters 10, 11, and 12.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 11.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 34 and 36.

VI. Congress and External Pressures

- Davidson et al.: Chapter 13.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 5.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 11, 15, and 16.

VII. Congress and Fiscal Policy

- Davidson et al.: Chapter 14.

- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 12.
- Weisberg et al.: Chapter 17.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapters 14 and 22.

VIII. Congress and Foreign Policy

- Davidson et al.: Chapter 15.
- Dodd & Oppenheimer: Chapter 14.
- *Suggested*: Schickler and Lee: Chapter 35.

IX. Conclusion

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