

117.251/17.252
Congress and the American Political System I

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M, W, 9:30–11:00
4-144

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URLS: Subject: <http://web.mit.edu/17.251/www>
There is also a Stellar site that will redirect you to the subject URL.

Purpose

The United States Congress is the most open of the national branches of government and therefore the most closely studied. The purpose of this subject is to find ways to deal with the vast array of information we have about Congress. The two basic questions we will be asking are (1) what does Congress do and why and (2) What are the various ways of studying congressional behavior?

To accomplish these goals, this subject is organized around two major learning modes: lectures/discussion and paper/problems. The lecture/discussion part will expose you to the basic social facts about Congress: what it takes to get elected, how Congress works internally, and how the relationships between Congress and the rest of the federal government are organized. The paper will focus on the 2016 congressional election and its aftermath. It will allow you to analyze the outcomes of this important national election in light of the research on elections and internal politics you will learn about. The problems will help you internalize spatial models as applied to legislatures. There will also be a take-home exercise that will allow you to explore how gerrymandering affects election outcomes.

This subject introduces students to Congress, primarily undergraduates, but graduate students who have never studied Congress are welcome, too. It is more empirical than theoretical, although theory encroaches here and there. The second subject in this sequence, which will be offered next year, is a seminar that is more theoretical than empirical, and is aimed toward graduate students and advanced undergraduates.

Having an introductory subject in American politics or policymaking, or receiving a 4 or 5 on the AP American Politics exam, is a prerequisite to taking 17.251.

Subject requirements

Readings

The core reading will be my textbook. I will pay you \$1 for each typo you find in the book, so that the third edition (let's hope!) will be better than the first two.

In addition to the textbook, there are several assignments that will augment the lectures and the text. You will do all the readings to coincide with the schedule at the end of the syllabus.

The following books are available for purchase at the Coop:

- Charles Stewart III, *Analyzing Congress*. 2nd ed. (New York, W.W. Norton, 2011).
- Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism*. Revised edition. (New York: Basic Books, 2016).
- Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, *Congress Reconsidered*, 10th ed. (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2013). (While earlier editions are interesting, make sure you have the 10th edition.)

Lectures

The lectures serve two purposes. First, they will fill in basic material which the readings presuppose. Second, they will put the readings in their larger contexts and, I hope, set the stage for discussions of the readings. I especially encourage you to ask questions during the lectures, either for clarification or to explore topics of interest to you.

Examinations

There will be a midterm and a one-hour final. The final will be held during the final examination period.

Paper

The upcoming 2016 congressional election promises to be an interesting one, both in terms of the dynamics of the election itself and in terms of the likely affect on the behavior of Congress when it convenes in January 2017. You will be responsible for taking a broad topic that is pertinent to the study of Congress and writing a 10–12 page paper about it in the context of the 2016 congressional election. Topics you might write about include new patterns of campaign finance, membership turnover, congressional redistricting, the performance of statistical models predicting the 2016 outcome, and the Senate election in any particular state. The election also will provide the opportunity for institutional changes in Congress, and you can write about that, too. More on this assignment once the class gets going.

Problem set

There are two problem sets in the term. You will be penalized for turning them in late.

Redistricting exercise

I will assign teams that will use Dave Redistricting website to draw congressional districts that meet certain criteria. More details when the time arrives.

Class attendance

You must come to class. If you can't come to class because you are sick or out of town, e-mail or call me ahead of time and let me know. Students who do not come to class, or who come and appear to be disengaged with the material (as evidenced by the fact that they never ask questions or contribute to discussions) will receive a lower grade.

Congressional roundtable

Each Wednesday we will start the class with a brief (15 minutes?) informal discussion about the previous week's developments in Congress. Everyone will be required to come into class with a newspaper/magazine/web page clipping to talk about. You will also need to e-mail me, by Tuesday night at 5:00 pm, the citation to the article. Come prepared to talk.

Laptops, cell phones, etc.

You may use portable computers (including tablets) *only* to take notes or, occasionally, to look up a fact related to the class discussion/lecture. You may not do anything else with your portable computer during class. I wander around the class, so if I see you doing something other than taking notes, I will know about it.

Grading distribution

- Class attendance and discussion (including roundtable contributions), 20%
- Problem sets, 20% (10% apiece)
- Midterm examination, 15%
- Redistricting exercise, 15%
- Paper, 15%
- Final examinations, 15%

Lecture/reading schedule

Topic	Date(s)	Assigned readings	Notes
I. Introduction	Sept. 7		An assignment (not quite a problem set) will be given out at the end of the class.
II. Unidimensional spatial model	Sept. 12	<i>Analyzing Congress</i> , chap. 1, pp. 3–23, 47–49	Problems will be assigned at the end of class
	Sept. 14	Dodd & Oppenheimer, chaps. 1 & 2	Roundtable
III. Constitutional origins of Congress	Sept. 19	<i>Analyzing Congress</i> , chap. 2; Appendix B.	
	Sept. 21	Stewart, “The Constitutional Origins of Congress” (available on the Stellar site)	Roundtable
IV. Origin & development of Congress	Sept. 26	<i>Analyzing Congress</i> , chap. 3 Dodd & Oppenheimer, chap. 16.	Hand in problems that were distributed on Sept. 12
	Sept. 28		Roundtable Redistricting project will be handed out at end of class.
	Oct. 3		No class today (probably)
V. Congressional candidates	Oct. 5	<i>Analyzing Congress</i> , chap. 4 Dodd & Oppenheimer, chap. 4	Roundtable
	Oct. 10		Columbus Day Holiday
	Oct. 12		Roundtable

Topic	Date(s)	Assigned readings	Notes
VI. Congressional voters	Oct. 17	<i>Analyzing Congress</i> , chap. 5 Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, "The 2010 Congressional Elections" (available on the Stellar site)	
	Oct. 19		Roundtable Written portion of redistricting project due today
VII. Regulating congressional elections	Oct. 24	<i>Analyzing Congress</i> , chap. 6 Dodd & Oppenheimer, chaps. 5 & 6	
	Oct. 26		Roundtable Present redistricting plans
	Oct. 31		Midterm
VIII. Multidimensional spatial model	Nov. 2	<i>Analyzing Congress</i> , chap 1, pp. 23–47	Problems will be distributed at the end of class
	Nov. 7		Roundtable
	Nov. 9		Post-election round-up (Might be done remotely)
IX. Congressional parties & leadership	Nov. 14	<i>Analyzing Congress</i> , chap. 7 Dodd & Oppenheimer, chap. 7.	Roundtable Hand in problems that were distributed on Nov. 2.
	Nov. 16		
	Nov. 21		
	Nov. 23		Thanksgiving Holiday
X. Congressional committees	Nov. 28	<i>Analyzing Congress</i> , chap. 8 Dodd & Oppenheimer, chap. 8..	
	Nov. 30		Roundtable
XI. Rules of the chamber/ Roll call voting	Dec. 5	<i>Analyzing Congress</i> , chap. 9 Dodd & Oppenheimer, chaps. 9 & 10.	
	Dec. 7		Roundtable
	Dec. 12		
XII. Review/wrap-up	Dec. 14	Mann and Ornstein (tbd) Dodd & Oppenheimer, chap. 17.	Roundtable

The average weekly reading load is around 60 pages/week before midterm and 80 pages/week after the midterm. In addition, you need to be working on the paper/project throughout the term, and not wait until the very end. Please plan your use of time wisely.