

17.251
Spring 2015
Paper assignment

Due date: May 14, 11:59 p.m.

I. Introduction

General overview

Below there are two paper assignments. You are to pick one and deliver a 12–15 paper to me by the end of the day on May 14. In addition, you will give a brief (roughly 10 minute) presentation to the class about your paper on May 12.

The topics come in one of two flavors: (1) write about the legislative process surrounding an important *historical piece* of legislation in the past or (2) write about the interaction of electoral and organizational politics in light of recent elections.

Choosing the topic

You must run the topic by me for approval. In addition, I will generally only allow one person per topic, so the sooner you get that taken care of the better. At the very least, I need to know the topic of your paper *no later than* Friday, April 3 (i.e., the Friday after Spring Break). If you wait until Spring Break (or even worse, until *after* Spring Break) to explore what your topic will be, I doubt you or I will be happy with the paper you write. You will be well advised to spend the next month poking around the library and online data sources finding out about your topic, or exploring several possible topics, rather than waiting to figure out what you're doing to do at the last minute.

If you are signed up for 17.252

If you are signed up for 17.252, the main difference in grading is the length and sophistication of the paper. For 17.252, the paper should be 20–25 pages, should engage with the professional political science literature more directly and, if at all possible, engage in at least a little original data analysis or case study work. If you do not wish to write a paper of this length and complexity, please make sure you are signed up for 17.251.

II. The Possible Paths

IIa. Important past legislation

The purpose of this path is for you to explore past periods of significant legislative activity, understand as much as you can about a landmark piece of legislation, consider how Congress has changed since then, and speculate what difference it would make if a similar piece of legislation were to be considered now.

Pick an important piece of legislation in American history. Write a paper in which you discuss the role of constituencies, committee, and party leaders in how the legislation was developed and ultimately passed. In writing this paper, you will need to take into account the following points and questions:

1. What is the policy background of the legislation? What was the social problem the legislation was intended to address? What were the major options available to Congress? What were the major interests pushing for different legislative directions?
2. Who were the major champions and opponents of the legislation, and what motivated them? Constituency? Policy interest? Political ambition? Institutional position?
3. What was the role, if any, of party leaders in the legislative process?
4. What was the role, if any, of informal groupings of legislators (such as the Conservative Coalition, the Conservative Opportunity Society, etc.) in the legislative process?
5. What role was played by congressional committees, and how did that differ by chamber?
6. Were there any special considerations that affected how the legislation was handled on the floor of the two chambers? For instance, was a filibuster threatened? Did the sponsors of the legislation lobby for a closed rule in the House?

Finally, by way of conclusion, I would like you to consider a wild counterfactual: If the same legislation had been considered by the 114th Congress, how have things changed that would have affected how a similar piece of legislation would have been considered?

While I am open about what legislation you would write about, to get your creative juices flowing, here is a list of twenty important bills that have passed since the Second World War.

- Taft-Hartley Labor-Management Relations Act of 1947
- Internal Revenue Code of 1954
- National Defense Education Act of 1958
- Civil Rights Act of 1964
- Voting Rights Act of 1965
- National Environmental Policy Act of 1969
- Consumer Product Safety Act of 1972
- Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974
- Airline Deregulation Act of 1978
- Superfund Law, 1980
- Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 (Gramm-Latta II)
- Social Security Amendments of 1983
- Tax Reform Act of 1986
- Ethics Reform Act of 1989
- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990
- Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996
- USA PATRIOT Act (2001)
- Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 Amendments of 2008
- American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009
- Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010)

Iib. Recent elections and institutional politics

The purpose of this path is for you to take the past decade's worth of congressional elections (from 2006 to 2014) and consider in detail how those elections have affected the institutional development of Congress.

Pick a topic that is pertinent to the study of Congress and write a 12–15 page paper about it in the context of elections from 2006 to 2014. Topics might include campaign finance, membership turnover, the development of committees, strategies of party leaders, congressional redistricting, etc.

The specific way you approach this paper will vary according to the topic you choose. For instance, if you pick campaign finance, you may want to focus on the effects that have followed the decision in the *Citizens United* case. Likewise, if you choose to study redistricting, you might want to take on the question of how redistricting after the 2010 census affected the composition of the House of Representatives for the following decade. On the other hand, if you pick party leadership, you might want to explore how the rise of the Tea Party has influenced how the Republican congressional leadership has been composed, and how top party leaders have tried to accommodate the demands of the Tea Party movement.

III. General Considerations

Sources

Whichever path you choose, I intend this to be a good, old-fashioned “term paper.” That means I expect you to dip into a combination of sources that range from congressional documents to CQ Weekly to books and journal articles.

There is one specific strategy you should (must?) avoid: typing topic words into Google and then using the random selection of term papers, newspaper articles, blog postings, poorly sourced ideological web sites, Wikipedia entries,¹

Each paper will be different in the details. There is an essay at the back of *Analyzing Congress* about doing congressional research. Consult it. There are resource links on the 17.251 web page. Use them.

Writing style

I expect your paper to conform to three sets of style books. Most generally, on matters of usage and style, rely on Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. For general matters of what the paper should look like (margins, headings, etc.) use Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of*

¹ Here is my view of Wikipedia: it is an encyclopedia, like any other. It's a little better on some things (it has probably nailed Taylor Swift's personal life) than others (don't get me going on the entry about the Haymarket Affair). However, like any encyclopedia, great or small, it has no business appearing in piece of serious writing, unless the subject is the encyclopedia entry itself.

Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations. (Just for future reference, Turabian is the “college paper” version of the *Chicago Manual of Style*. If you intend to continue writing seriously, I’d suggest getting a copy and internalizing it.) Turabian also has good advice on usage. On citations, rely on *The Style Manual for Political Science*. The citation rules are reprinted at the following URL: <http://depts.washington.edu/pswrite/cite.html>.

Academic integrity

It is important that the work in the paper be your own. But, it’s also appropriate to ask for some help. So, here are the guidelines.

The biggest issue is always plagiarism. Plagiarism is the appropriation of someone else’s ideas or words as your own. Within the academic world, this is the worst offence you can commit. At some universities, like the University of Virginia, one infraction leads to expulsion and banishment forever from that university. MIT doesn’t do it this way, but this is my rule: If you plagiarize a paper, you fail the class.

When in doubt, err on the side of attribution. The two basic rules are these:

- If you use someone else’s language exactly, you must display it, or put it in quotes, and provide guidance about where *precisely* (meaning page number) the reader can find it.
- If you make a claim that is not common knowledge, you must provide a citation to it.

The MIT Writing and Communication Center web site has links to a couple of very good web sites that deal with how to avoid plagiarism. Check out <http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/avoiding-plagiarism/>

Another issue is receiving help from someone else. It is fine with me if you show a draft of your paper to a friend (or the Writing Center) and seek feedback concerning style and usage. It is also fine if you bounce ideas off a friend. If you do, make sure it is your words that go on the page. Just to be safe, you should thank anyone who gave you assistance in writing the paper, in the very first footnote or at the end of the paper, where the citations begin.

From my experience, almost all plagiarism among students who grew up in the United States is due to rushing to meet the paper deadline and panicking because there’s not enough time to do everything. If that applies to you — that is, you find yourself physically impossible to finish the paper on time because you are hosed — ask for an extension.