

George Washington University, Graduate School of Political Management
Master of Arts in Legislative Affairs
PSC 218 --- LEGISLATIVE POLITICS

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Course Description

This course meets on Wednesdays from 6-8 p.m. in the Hall of States.

The course provides a thorough grounding in the organization, powers and politics of the U.S. Congress. As one of the required course in the MLA program, it examines major issues in U.S. congressional history and legislative organization. It analyzes the theory, structure and process of the U.S. Congress as an institution unto itself. It analyzes Congress based on structural and historical differences between the House and the Senate; the impact of rules on legislative evolution; individual and collective decision making and the means by which Congress exerts influence on public policy; party and committee activities; interest-group activities; member-constituency relations; and executive-legislative relations.

Class Expectations

This is a graduate level course and will be treated as such. Students are expected to stay abreast of political happenings in the U.S. Government, particularly in Congress by reading daily newspapers, blogs etc. Classroom lectures will be limited and class participation is strongly encouraged, especially since your grade depends on it. Weekly reading loads will vary, but can be upwards of 150 pages a week and much of it will include academic theory. That said, most weekly reading assignments also include a variety of mainstream articles about Congress and its Members, which helps to provide an additional – and important -- way to analyze Congress, the institution. We have a lot to cover in this course, so it is imperative that you keep up with the readings!

You must obtain a GWU student ID in order to access the campus library. Students are expected to utilize library resources for class papers in addition to utilizing online resources. You also will need a GWU account to access Blackboard, where many important class documents will be stored, including a list of class assignments.

Cheating of any kind – including misrepresenting your own work; taking credit for the work of others without crediting them; and/or fabricating information – will not be tolerated and will be dealt with severely. Please refer to the GSPM Student Handbook and the GWU Student Guide to Rights and Responsibilities for more information about proper and improper academic conduct.

I realize that many of you have full-time jobs during the day, as do I. You are responsible for attending each lesson, but I realize infrequent, unavoidable absences due to work or illness may occur. If that happens, please let me know ahead of time, and I will do the same for you in the rare case that I am unable to attend class on a given week.

Required Texts **The books are available at the GWU Bookstore, but if you purchase them elsewhere, please make sure you order the correct edition!**

- Davidson, Roger, and Walter Oleszek. 2007. *Congress and Its Members*. 11th ed. Washington D.C.: CQ Press.
- Mayhew, David. 2004. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. New Haven: Yale University/Press.
- Oleszek, Walter. 2007. *Congressional Procedures and the Policy Process*. 7th ed. Washington D.C.: CQ Press.
- Panagopoulous, Costas, and Joshua Schank. 2007. *All Roads Lead to Congress: The \$300 Billion Fight Over Highway Funding*. 1st ed. Washington D.C.: CQ Press.
- Sinclair, Barbara. 2007. *Unorthodox Lawmaking*. 3rd ed. Washington D.C.: CQ Press.
- Thurber, James. 2005. *Rivals for Power*. 3rd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Grades

Your grade is entirely dependant on your ability to effectively analyze complex ideas and to generate and support new theories. You must be able to write well and to effectively communicate your thoughts in a persuasive and authoritative manner.

The grading curve for this class is steep. An “A” equates to near perfection. A “B” or “B+” indicates that you have adequately completed the basic assignment for a graduate-level class. Grades less than a “B” indicate a need for significant improvement because the work falls short of graduate school requirements. I reserve the right to raise or lower a student’s grade based on class participation, academic progress made by the student over the semester and/or late submission of assignments.

I will not offer “incomplete” grades to any student who fails turn in the papers by the end of the term except for extreme hardship cases, as pre-approved by the professor. Late submission of any paper will result in an automatic grade reduction at the rate of one full letter grade per week. This is a graduate level course, so anything below a C is an F. Any paper submitted after the last day of the course will receive an automatic F.

Please see our class in Blackboard for additional information about grading, including tips about writing effectively and thinking critically. You must have access to Blackboard for this class.

Class Assignments

Your grade will be awarded based on the following assignments:

- **Weekly one-pagers and class participation** **20%**
- **Mid-term exam** **30%**
- **Term paper** **50%**

Weekly Reading: For a detailed list of weekly reading assignments, please refer to Blackboard.

Weekly one-pagers: Briefly summarize the class readings in ONE paragraph and then offer your ORIGINAL analysis of the readings – do not simply regurgitate what the authors said. Some topics you might explore: How do the readings mesh with this course? How do the readings link together? What is their common theme? What do the readings mean for us today? Should we read them or is there something else we should read? Do not be afraid to criticize the authors as long as you can make a reasonable and well-supported argument for another point of view. Note: The papers can be single spaced but must not exceed one page – I

stop reading at the end of page one. Also, formal citations are not necessary – mentioning the author’s name or the name of a book or article is sufficient for these assignments.

Term paper: Although students must submit a term-paper proposal for review and comment, you will have free rein to choose any topic that relates to the class theme of “Legislative Politics” so choose something that will interest you. Students will present a 10-minute summary of their paper to the class. Success or failure in the presentation will be taken into account as part of the final term paper grade.

The paper should be 20-25 pages long (not including citations) and in 11-12 point Times New Roman font, double-spaced. End notes or footnotes should be used, and the Chicago Manual of Style format is preferred. You must email your term paper to me by 5 PM on the day it is due. You must also bring a printed copy of your paper to class the day it is due.

While it is important to develop the historical context of the issue in your paper, this is not a history course so the paper should focus on the current state of relations with a particular topic – although historical context may be appropriate to include. You also should offer an educated prediction about the topic’s future, if applicable. This is also not a public policy class nor an opportunity to re-use a paper from another class, unless significant new research is applied. While you are encouraged to explore other influences on your topic (the media, the President, lobbyists etc.) your topic must focus primarily on Congress.

Most importantly, your paper must be based on original analysis and it must be scoped so that you can adequately explore your topic within the page limitation. The paper must be well written, with a strong and defensible thesis, as well as significant support for said thesis. Make sure your thesis scope is narrow enough so that it can be adequately supported within the length of this paper. You must incorporate class readings, as well as other original research into your paper. Grammar, spelling and punctuation errors will negatively impact your grade, as will poor organization, flow or choice of words. Please see Blackboard for additional information about writing an effective research paper for this class.

The paper’s format can be relatively simple: Define an issue or problem that Congress has devoted attention to; examine the issue in some depth including current and past reform attempts; examine the role that Congress, the institution and/or its members, has had on the issue; and offer a solution or predicted outcome for the topic of discussion.

Your paper might follow this format:

- *Topic: Statement of the problem/issue – ensure you have a strong thesis that can be well supported. Scope your thesis.*
- *Background: Source of the problem. Contending views. Previous efforts to reform and an analysis of the players, both congressional and public.*
- *Options: Previously attempted options for congressional reform (or other reform such as judicial) that were not successful. Options currently under debate.*
- *Evaluation of Options: Who are the players pushing reform today? How can they use congressional procedures or practices to secure reform? How do they build a coalition? Is congressional oversight an effective option?*
- *Recommendation: How do you measure success in terms of reform? Is it all about passing legislation or more about influencing public debate?*

I strongly recommend that you work ahead so as to avoid last-minute problems with any assignment. Do not procrastinate! If you have questions or need assistance, please contact me. I am always happy to help you.