

PLSC 213: The Legislative Process: Theoretical and Empirical Approaches to Studying the U.S. Congress

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Class Hours: Wednesdays, 9:25–11:15 AM

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Course Description

This course covers important theoretical and empirical approaches to the study of legislative politics. The main objectives of this course are to come to a deeper understanding of the motivations and institutions that influence legislator behavior in the U.S. Congress, as well as to think critically about existing explanations for these behaviors. While it will focus mainly on the United States Congress, many of the theories and empirical strategies will be applicable to other legislative institutions. Studying the U.S. Congress and its members can be a daunting task. Therefore, most weeks' readings will include one chapter from a textbook that lays out the foundational information regarding the legislative body. Each week we will also read at least two important pieces of theoretical or empirical research to demonstrate how to engage in rigorous social science.

Admissions Criteria

Enrollment in this class is capped at 18. Please note that if student interest exceeds available seating, preference will be given to declared political science majors in allotting spaces.

Book for Purchase

- Smith, Steven S., Jason M. Roberts, and Ryan J. Vander Wielen. *The American Congress: Tenth Edition*, Rowan & Littlefield

Other course readings will be made available electronically.

Prerequisites

The only prerequisite for this class is the successful completion of Introduction to American Government.

Course Requirements

1. **Reaction Papers (25%):** Students are required to submit short (2-3 page) critical reaction papers during three weeks of their choosing. The purpose of these papers is to demonstrate that you have not only completed the assigned reading, but that you have also given serious thought to how it relates to that week's material. The best strategy for these papers is to focus on an aspect of one, several, or all of the readings, and critically evaluate their argument or approach to their research question. Some possible questions to motivate the reaction papers include:

- What are the authors' arguments? Are those arguments convincing in light of recent events?
- How do the authors support their arguments? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence?
- What are the possible consequences of the readings? Do their findings have consequences for how we think about other political institutions and political behaviors?
- How do these readings compare or contrast to other material with which we have engaged or other relevant (recent or not) political events?
- What questions remain unanswered with respect to the topics the readings have covered?

When crafting your reaction paper, clearly state what the author's/s' arguments are in their writing. In your own writing, clearly state the thesis statement for your own criticism or argument. Reaction papers will be graded on their ability to succinctly address what the assigned readings and their ability to successfully convey an original argument. Papers will be graded out of 10 points according to the following:

- 0 points: Failure to complete reaction paper
- 1–3 points: Completion of reaction paper but a misreading of the articles
- 4–6 points: Accurate summary of readings, but hardly any critical response to the readings
- 7–10 points: Analysis of the arguments that provides interesting perspective by addressing strengths or weaknesses of assigned readings

At least 2 reaction papers must be submitted by the Spring Break

2. **Literature Review and Research Design (35%):** By the midterm, students will need to pick one original research question regarding the US Congress on which they wish to investigate further. Picking an original research question is a difficult task for scholars at any level, so please do not think you must do this alone. Feel free to email and meet with me during

office hours to discuss possible research projects. The first key step is to figure out what aspects of the legislative process interest you and about what topics you would like to know more. I can serve as a guide for crafting the research question, as well as identifying literature that would be relevant to answering your question.

The midterm class will require each student complete a 1-2-page memo that states the research question and identifies at least three works of scholarship that provide literature that might serve as a guide to answer the question.

By the final session of the semester, students will complete a literature review and research design that will serve as the final project.

A successful literature review will identify between 10 to 20 works of scholarship that are relevant to the research question that you ask. The paper will then critically discuss these works and address how they relate to your chosen question. The literature review is not merely a summary of a list of works, but rather a critical examination through the lens of your research question. The literature review section of the paper should state the research question and critically discuss previous research that addresses the question. These reviews should not simply be a rehashing of previous work, but critically discuss them and relate how they are relevant to the research questions.

A successful research design section of the project will first identify the key outcome or dependent variable that is addressed in the research question. Students will then identify how to measure that variable. Students will then identify the key explanatory or independent variables that they expect to explain the answer differences in their outcome variable. Students will then identify how they will answer their research question and how they expect the key explanatory variables to relate to their outcome variable. Finally, students must identify a possible data source to empirically test this relationship and provide arguments for why it is adequate for their design.

Once again, identifying the optimal research design can be a difficult task for even the most experienced social scientist. Please discuss possible research design objectives with me during the semester.

This project will be approximately 15-20 pages long.

Students are welcome to write a senior essay in this seminar, but per department rules their research paper must be a minimum of 25 pages in length and is expected to gather data and have a section of the paper that attempts to answer their research question empirically.

The final project will be due at **5pm on May 6th**. Late papers will penalized half a letter grade for each day they are late. While the final paper is due the first, students are expected to give short 7-minute presentation on their paper during the final class meeting. This presentation should be made using slides. Students are free to use whatever software they choose (e.g. PowerPoint, Beamer, Keynote, Google Slides). Presentations should be concise by stating the research question, how previous literature informs us about a possible answer, what the key variables are, what research design you choose to test this hypothesis, as well as your possible data source. Presentations should be no more than 5 slides.

Successful final projects will have a clear research question, integrate how existing literature is relevant to their research question with clear writing, identify appropriate variables that

explain why the research question is a puzzle, and defend why the potential data source they have chosen is appropriate for answering the question.

The grading rubric can be explained as such:

- **A/A-**: These projects will have a clear research question. They will identify several relevant works of social science research that provide a foundation and guidance for answering the research question. The student will not simply rehash what the previous literature states, but identify how it relates to the question and perhaps suggest why this literature was insufficient or failed to answer the student's research question. The student will explain how literature review will inform the research design and provide expectations for how the identified explanatory variables will answer their research question with respect to the identified dependent variable. Students will also identify and provide justifications for using their potential data source.
 - **B+/B/B-**: These projects will have a clear research question and have a grasp on what the previous literature states, but they will be less successful at integrating how it relates to the research question. They will have appropriate ideas about what a potential research design should be, but their approach will be less clearly informed by the previous literature.
 - **C**: These project will have a research question, but it is less clear. The literature review simply summarizes previous works and there is no explanation as to how this literature informs our ability to answer the research question. The research design has little attachment to the literature review. The data source chosen may be appropriate, but there is no explanation as to why it is appropriate for the design.
 - **D/F**: The paper does not meet the requirements of the assignment or the student has presented unintelligible or plagiarized work from a previous source.
3. **Quizzes (20%)**: There is much factual information to understand to appropriately study Congress. For this reason, it is necessary to ensure that you learn the basics of how the legislative institution works. Each class period will begin with a brief (10 minutes maximum) quiz covering material from that week's textbook reading. These quizzes will cover major topics from the readings. At the end of the semester I will drop your lowest quiz score from the final grade.
4. **Participation (20%)**: I expect that you will participate in every seminar meeting, and that your participation will reflect a careful reading of the assigned texts. A high class participation grade (e.g., A) will be given to students who not only participate in every seminar, but who make comments that draw connections between assigned texts, who support their comments by pointing to relevant page numbers and passages from the text, and who demonstrate their engagement with the readings in other ways. Students who participate in every seminar but whose comments do not show careful engagement with the text will receive a lower participation grade (e.g., B). Students who do not participate regularly in seminar will receive a low participation grade (e.g., C or below). By midterm I will provide you with an update on your participation grade in class to that point. If you find that you are having trouble speaking in class, please talk to me about it so that we can find ways to facilitate your participation.

Academic Integrity

For the in-class quizzes, you may not consult any materials or engage with anyone else in the class. For the written assignments, you may not plagiarize previously written work. The most important assignment in this class involves a literature review. You are responsible for following Yale University's policies regarding academic dishonesty ([found here](#)). Anyone who is found to be violating those policies will be reported to the Yale College Executive Committee.

Nearly all of the previous research you will be discussing for that project will have been discussed by others, as well. Remember that it is your responsibility to provide *your own* interpretation and criticism to the literature. *Please ask me about any questions you may have regarding citation practices.* You may also take advantage of the resources provided by the Yale Writing Center.

Course Outline

Week 01, 1/15: Class Introduction

- Smith et al., Chapter 1
- Willis & Kane, "How Congress Stopped Working", *ProPublica*
- Packer, George. 2010. "The Empty Chamber" *The New Yorker*

Week 02, 1/22 Representation and The Development of the US Congress

- Smith et al., Chapter 2
- Miller, Warren E. and Donald E. Stokes, 1963. "Constituency Influence in Congress" *American Political Science Review*
- Mayhew, David. 1974. *The Electoral Connection*, p. 11-64
- Ahler, Douglas J. and David E. Broockman. 2018. "The Delegate Paradox" *The Journal of Politics*

Week 03, 1/29 Elections

- Smith et al., Chapter 3
- Hall, Andrew B. 2015. "What Happens When Extremists Win Primaries." *American Political Science Review*
- Sulkin, Tracy. 2009. "Campaign Appeals and Legislative Action." *Journal of Politics*
- Hirano, Shigeo, James M. Snyder Jr., and J. Mark Hansen. 2010. "Primaries and Polarization in the U.S. Congress." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*

Week 04, 2/5 Congressional Careers

- Smith et al., Chapter 4

- Thomsen, Danielle. 2014. "Ideological Moderates Won't Run: How Party Fit Matters for Partisan Polarization in Congress" *Journal of Politics*
- Grose, Christian R., Neil Malhotra, and Robert Parks Van Houweling. 2015. "Explaining Explanations: How Legislators Explain their Policy Positions and How Citizens React" *American Journal of Political Science*
- Grimmer, Justin. 2015. "Appropriators, Not Position Takers." *American Journal of Political Science*

Week 05, 2/12 Parties in Congress

- Smith et al., Chapter 5
- Aldrich, John. 2010. *Why Parties?* Chapter 2
- Jenkins, Jeffrey A. and Nathan W. Monroe, 2014. "Negative Agenda Control and the Conservative Coalition in the U.S. House." *Journal of Politics*
- Krehbiel, Keith. 1997. *Pivotal Politics* Chapter 2.

Week 06, 2/19 Committees

- Smith et al., Chapter 6
- Cox, Gary W. and Mathew D. McCubbins. 1993. *Legislative Leviathan*, chs. 3-4.
- Fong, Christian. 2020. "Expertise, Networks, and Interpersonal Influence in Congress." *Journal of Politics*
- Powell, Eleanor and Justin Grimmer. 2013. "Congressmen in Exile: The Politics and Consequences of Involuntary Committee Removal." *Journal of Politics*

Week 07, 2/26 Congressional Lawmaking

- Smith et al., Chapter 7
- Sinclair, Barbara. *Unorthodox Lawmaking* Chapter 2-3
- Volden, Craig and Alan Wiseman, *Legislative Effectiveness* 2014. Chapter 1-3.

Week 08, 3/4 Research Question Prospectus Presentations/ Data for Studying Congress

- Final Project Prospectus Due

Week 09, 3/25 Voting

- Smith et al., Chapter 9
- Poole, Keith and Howard Rosenthal. 1985. "A Spatial Model for Legislative Roll Call Analysis." *American Journal of Political Science*
- Bonica, Adam. 2013. "Ideology and Interests in the Political Marketplace" *American Journal of Political Science*

- Roberts, Jason. 2007. "The Statistical Analysis of Roll-Call Data: A Cautionary Tale." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*

Week 10, 4/1 Congress and the Executive

- Smith et al., Chapter 10
- Lowande, Kenneth. 2019. "Politicization and Responsiveness in Executive Agencies." *Journal of Politics*
- Binder, Sarah A. 1999. "The Dynamics of Gridlock" *American Journal of Political Science*
- Lee, Frances E. 2008. "Dividers, not Uniters: Presidential Leadership and Senate Partisanship, 1981–2004." *Journal of Politics*

Week 11, 4/8 Congress and the Judiciary

- Smith et al., Chapter 11
- Primo, David M., Sarah A. Binder, and Forrest Maltzman. 2008. "Who Consents? Competing Pivots in Federal Judicial Selection." *American Journal of Political Science*
- Owens, Ryan J. 2010. "The Separation of Powers and Supreme Court Agenda Setting." *American Journal of Political Science*

Week 12, 4/15 Lobbying

- Smith et al., Chapter 9
- Kalla, Joshua L. and David E. Broockman. 2016. "Campaign Contributions Facilitate Access to Congressional Officials: A Randomized Field Experiment." *American Journal of Political Science*
- Shepherd, Michael E. and Hye Young You. 2019. "Exit Strategy: Career Concerns and Revolving Doors in Congress." *American Political Science Review*

Week 13, 4/22 Course Wrap-up & Presentation of Research Designs