Course Description

This class is designed to provide you with an understanding of the place of the United States Congress within the American political system. The central questions are: what motivates the behavior of members of Congress, what influences why they run for office and how they get elected, how do they structure institutions to meet their goals, how do structures affect outcomes, what is the role of parties and party leadership in shaping the policy process, how do members of Congress interact with the President, the courts, interest groups and the public, and how can Congress be reformed to work better? Ultimately, how important is Congress for the making of public policy and why? We will only be able to cover a small fraction of the work on Congress, but I will attempt to introduce you to the central questions and theoretical approaches in the field. We will begin the semester with a few weeks on normative and positive approaches to studying Congress. Normative approaches focus on questions of representation – who does Congress represent: their district or the nation as a whole? Racial minorities or whites? Women’s issues or more gender-neutral concerns? Narrow economic interests or broader general interests? Next will will examine positive theory, which is the dominant theoretical approach to studying Congress. This theory is rooted in assumptions about rational behavior and the importance of institutions, such as the committee system. We also examine how Congress is dealing with the challenges our nation faces in the fall of 2018, especially how members of Congress are working (or not) with President Trump and the House and Senate elections. We will conclude with a section on reforming Congress. How should the institution be structured and how can its performance be improved?

Course Format

This class is offered for 4 credits with two 75-minute lectures and one 50-minute discussion section each week. It also carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities for about two hours out of classroom for each credit hour (that is, eight additional hours a week). This course will be primarily a lecture class given its size. Yet, I encourage class participation. I often will begin class with a discussion of current events, especially as they relate to what is going on in Congress and the upcoming midterm elections. I encourage you to bring questions to class and to respond to issues I may raise. The goals of this class are both theoretical and practical: I aim to give you a theoretical basis for understanding the U.S. Congress and a greater awareness of the events to which theory can be applied.
Readings for the Course
The following book is required for the course and is available for purchase at the University of Wisconsin Bookstore and various online outlets:


There also are readings that will be available on Canvas, https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/115496. These readings are required and will be important for the course. I may add a few shorter articles throughout the semester (that are not on the syllabus) on important, fast-evolving issues.

In addition to the assigned readings, I also encourage you (and this should be a life-time habit rather than a course assignment) to keep up with the national news on a daily basis, ideally from both left-of-center (*New York Times, Washington Post*) and right-of-center (*Wall Street Journal, National Review*) outlets. This will enhance your understanding of the material presented in class and will make you better able to participate in class discussion. There are also two “insider” newspapers that cover the politics of Congress: *Roll Call* and *The Hill*. They may be found online at http://www.rollcall.com and http://www.thehill.com. You may also find it entertaining and informative to check out CSPAN’s coverage of Congress, https://www.c-span.org/. You will learn a lot about the legislative process by watching it unfold in real time. Other good resources are nationaljournal.com (free) and *CQ Weekly* (you can get online access if you login through the UW library system).

Student Responsibilities
This will not be new advice, but it is essential to read the assigned readings each week before coming to class and section. It is not possible to put off the reading until just before the exams and expect to do well in the class. Some of the reading will be discussed in class, but others will be points of departure for discussion sections and material that I will present in lecture. I expect a critical reading of the material. Do not accept everything you read – you certainly will not agree with everything you are presented with in this class. You will gain much more from class meetings and discussion sections if you come prepared. The course outline will be followed as closely as possible; major departures from the schedule will be noted. One final word of warning: there is some formal and statistical material in this course. You do not have to be a math or statistics whiz to take this course, but if you have serious “number phobia” you may want to consider taking another course.

Learning Outcomes
The goal of the class is to give you the skills you need to understand how Congress works. This will be especially useful for anyone who is considering a career in Washington, but is also important for any citizen who wants to understand the political process. You will also write a policy memo as the paper assignment for the class, which would be similar to the writing you would be doing as a congressional staffer.

Course Evaluation
There will be a midterm that counts for 25% of your grade, a research paper that is 30%, a final exam will be 35%, and attendance and participation in discussion section will be 10%. The format of the exams will be a combination of multiple choice, identification, and essay. The final exam will only be partially comprehensive (75% will be on material since the midterm and 25% will be comprehensive). All reading material and lectures will be fair game on the exams. In calculating the final grade, number grades rather than letter grades will be averaged. I will give you more details about the paper assignment in a few weeks.
Other Considerations

Your success in this class is important to us. All students are strongly encouraged to visit office hours if only to introduce yourself and share how the course is working for you. We expect the classroom to be an inclusive and welcoming environment where each student has the potential to learn. For more information on diversity and inclusion the University of Wisconsin see: https://diversity.wisc.edu/.

If you have a disability or circumstance that could affect your performance in class, please contact me early in the semester so that I can identify and provide reasonable instructional accommodations. The McBurney Center for Disability Services can provide official documentation of disabilities (for more information see https://mcburney.wisc.edu/).

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. This includes using someone else’s words or ideas without proper attribution. We will report any cases of academic dishonesty to the Assistant Dean for Academic Integrity. Please make sure you are familiar with the policies outlined by the Dean of Students (https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-integrity/).

Finally, electronic devices (laptops, phones, etc.) will not be allowed in class. I will talk more about this on the first day of class.

Course Outline: (lecture outlines will be posted on the Canvas site that you can get through Learn@UW on MyUW).

I. Introduction: Normative and Positive Theories of Congress and Overview

A. Overview of Congress and Introduction to the course: September 6

American Congress, Chapter 1.
Mann and Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse than it Looks*, preface and introduction, xiii-xxiv.
Yuval Levin, “Congress Is Weak Because Its Members Want It to Be Weak; There’s a constitutional crisis, but it’s not the one you think,” *Commentary*, June 18, 2018.

B. Representation: Descriptive and Substantive, Responsiveness and Responsibility (normative theory): September 11-13

American Congress, first part of Chapter 2, pp. 31-36.
David Canon, *Race, Redistricting and Representation*, Preface -Chapter 1, xi-59.
C. Member Goals, Resources, and Strategy: September 18

*American Congress*, Chapter 4.

D. The spatial analysis of Congress (positive theory): September 18-20

*American Congress*, Appendix, pp. 405-416.
Christopher Beam, “The Only Politics Article You’ll Ever Have To Read. What if political scientists covered the news?,” *Slate Magazine*, June 4, 2010.

II. History and Evolution of Congress

A. Constitutional Foundations: September 20

*American Congress*, second part of Chapter 2, pp. 36-47.
Charles Stewart, “Congress and the Constitutional System.”

B. Evolution of Congress: September 25-27

*American Congress*, last part of Chapter 2, pp. 47-57.

III. Getting Elected

A. The Rules of the Game – October 2-4

*American Congress*, first part of Chapter 3, pp. 59-74.

B. The Voters’ Side of the Story – October 9-11

*American Congress*, last part of Chapter 3, pp. 85-92.
John Fund, “Nancy Pelosi Is Damaging Democrats’ Takeover Chances,” *National Review*, August 12,
2018.

C. The Candidates’ Side of the Story: Strategic Politicians and the Incumbency Advantage–October 16

American Congress, middle part of Chapter 3, pp. 74-85.

******* In Class Midterm Exam on Thursday, October 18th *******
(exam will cover readings through October 16th)

IV. Inside Congress: Institutions of Congress

A. Committees – October 23-25
American Congress, Chapter 6, pp. 173-216.

B. Parties and Party Leadership – October 30-November 1
American Congress, Chapter 5, pp. 131-172.
Mark Leibovich, “This Is the Way Paul Ryan’s Speakership Ends.” New York Times Magazine, August 7, 2018

V. Inside the Institution: Congressional Behavior and Legislative Process – November 6-8

American Congress, Chapters 7 and 8, pp. 217-76.

VI. Budget Politics and Oversight – November 13-15

American Congress, Chapter 12, pp. 375-403.

VII. Links to the Constituency – November 20

*American Congress*, Chapter 11, pp. 345-73.

VIII. Congress and the Courts – November 27-29

*American Congress*, Chapter 10, pp. 315-43.

IX. Congress, the President, and Policy – December 4-6

*American Congress*, Chapter 9, pp. 277-313.

*** Paper due in class on December 11th ***

X. Congressional Legitimacy, the Future, and Reform—December 11

Adam Carrington, “3 reforms for repairing Congress, the ‘broken branch’,” January 26, 2018, The Hill.
Also review the last section of the “Running Scared” article from a couple of weeks ago

*** Final Exam on Monday, December 17th. 12:30 p.m. - 2:30 p.m., location to be announced ***