

Congressional Politics

Syllabus

Nick Beauchamp
NYU Department of Politics

Email: nick.beauchamp@nyu.edu
Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday, 2-4pm.

By design and in practice, Congress is the heart of American national politics. It is both complex and comparatively unusual, and as we will see, there are numerous angles to approach it from, ranging from the wider perspective (history, candidates, voters, districts) to internal dynamics (parties, committees, rules) and other institutions and issues (the Presidency, the peculiarities of the Senate, polarization). We will explore many branches of contemporary research on these topics, and students will learn a variety of techniques for thinking critically about models of strategic behavior, analyzing data to empirically test research hypothesis, and relating these techniques to concrete, normatively important political issues in Congressional politics. Each student will use these skills to develop her or his own research project on a topic of interest, including data collection and analysis to test the research hypothesis.

Requirements Each student will be required to write weekly 1-page response papers, present to the class at least three of the papers or chapters we will be reading, and develop a final project. In addition there will be three brief in-class exercises. The final grade will be determined by 30% class participation and presentations, 20% response papers, 10% in-class exercises, and 40% the final project.

- **Response papers** These should be short, but not summaries. Rather, they should focus on one or two related readings, emphasize their strengths, and present critiques and avenues for improvement or further research, as well as questions raised that might be interesting to discuss in class. Students may skip up to two weeks of their choosing.
- **Presentations** A sign-up sheet will be posted online after the first class, and students are expected to work out their schedule in the first couple weeks of class. Presentations should be very brief (5-10 minutes) and should include a short overview of the chosen reading and, as with the response papers, an evaluation of its strengths, weaknesses, and the substantive questions it raises.
- **Final paper** Students must produce a research paper with at least preliminary empirical conclusions. It will consist of a carefully developed research hypothesis, overview of the relevant literature, a plan for data collection and how the data will be used to test the hypothesis, and a discussion of possible pitfalls. Data must be at least preliminarily collected and used to test the hypothesis, although it is understood that a single semester may not provide time for full-fledged data analysis. Along the way, students will be required to submit

a short paper proposal, and the last class will be dedicated to discussions of paper proposals and research design.

- **Texts** The following books are required for this course. We will also read a number of research papers on congressional politics, which will be provided in the packet. The papers can also be readily obtained online; I recommend Google Scholar or Jstor (accessed from on campus).

1. C.H. Stewart. *Analyzing Congress*. WW Norton & Company, 2001.
2. G.C. Jacobson. *The politics of congressional elections*. Longman, 7th edition, 2008.
3. J.M. Roberts, S.S. Smith, and R.J. Vander Wielen. *The American Congress Reader*. Cambridge University Press, 2009. (RSW)
4. F.E. Lee. *Beyond ideology: politics, principles, and partisanship in the US Senate*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.
5. N.M. McCarty, K.T. Poole, and H. Rosenthal. *Polarized America: The dance of ideology and unequal riches*. MIT Press Cambridge, MA, 2006

Groundwork

These first weeks lay the foundations for the later, more detailed analyses of Congressional behavior. The spatial model, though by no means the last word in modeling political behavior, is the foundation of many of the models of Congress we will be exploring, whether presented formally or lurking as an informal metaphor behind more descriptive accounts. Of equal importance is a familiarity with how Congress – a legislative organization unlike most others in the world – got to the state in which we currently see it. This history also sets the stage for many of the normative issues underlying contemporary debates and, indirectly, positive research.

Week 1. Introduction

Monday

Course overview, discussion of assignments, grading, and policies. Discussion of research papers, and what that will entail.

Wednesday

We start things off with a discussion of a few contemporary Congressional issues, which students are encouraged to keep in mind over the course of the semester.

Week 2. Congress and the spatial model

Monday

Stewart, Chapter 1.

Wednesday

“Introduction to the Spatial Model of Legislating,” Steven Smith et. al. (RSW, 40)

K.A. Shepsle and B.R. Weingast. Positive theories of congressional institutions. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, pages 149–179, 1994

[Exercise 1: A few spatial problems.]

Week 3. History

Monday

Stewart, Chapters 2-3.

Wednesday

The *Federalist*, 10 and 51. James Madison. (RSW 5)

“U.S. House Members in their Constituencies: An Exploration,” Richard Fenno, Jr. (RSW, 6)

Elections, candidates, voters

Who gets elected, and why? How much do issues matter, versus economic conditions, spending, incumbency, or district characteristics? All of these possibilities are very much active loci of research, in part because definitive answers remain elusive. Because voting data are relatively plentiful, these topics are also fertile ground for your own research proposals.

Week 4. Candidates and campaigns 1

Monday

Stewart, Chapter 4.

Jacobson, Chapter 3.

Wednesday

S. Ansolabehere, J.M. Snyder Jr, and C. Stewart III. Candidate positioning in us house elections. *American Journal of Political Science*, pages 136–159, 2001

C.H. Franklin. Eschewing obfuscation? campaigns and the perception of us senate incumbents. *The American Political Science Review*, pages 1193–1214, 1991

Week 5. Candidates and campaigns 2

Monday

Jacobson, Chapter 4.

G.W. Cox and J.N. Katz. Why did the incumbency advantage in us house elections grow? *American Journal of Political Science*, pages 478–497, 1996

Wednesday

S. Ansolabehere, J.M. De Figueiredo, and J.M. Snyder. Why is there so little money in politics?, 2003

J. Goodliffe. The effect of war chests on challenger entry in us house elections. *American Journal of Political Science*, pages 830–844, 2001

Week 6. Voters

Monday

Stewart, Chapter 5.

Jacobson, Chapter 5.

Wednesday

L.M. Bartels. Partisanship and voting behavior, 1952-1996. *American Journal of Political Science*, pages 35–50, 2000

J.R. Hibbing and J.R. Alford. The electoral impact of economic conditions: who is held responsible? *American Journal of Political Science*, pages 423–439, 1981

Week 7. Districts and representation

Monday

Stewart, Chapter 6.

Jacobson, Chapter 6-8.

Wednesday

“Eldridge Gerry’s Salamander: The Electoral Consequences of the Reapportionment Revolution,” Gary Cox and Jonathan Katz. (RSW, 8)

B. Canes-Wrone, D.W. Brady, and J.F. Cogan. Out of step, out of office: Electoral accountability and house members’ voting. *American Political Science Review*, 96(01):127–140, 2002

“Congress: The Electoral Connection,” David Mayhew. (RSW, 126)

Inside Congress

Just as important as who gets elected, is how those elected representatives produce law. Though the US legislature is more open than many others around the world, where party control is stronger, it nevertheless remains a challenge to model how the parties, committees, and rules interact to produce bills. Much is decided behind closed doors, making it tricky to model and test strategic voting and other behavior. But these institutions within the larger institution are the heart of Congressional decision making, and no outcome can be understood without understanding these internal dynamics.

Week 8. Parties

Monday

Stewart, Chapter 7.

“Party influence in Congress,” Steven Smith (RSW, 16)

Wednesday

“Setting the Agenda,” Gary Cox. (RSW, 15)

E. Schickler and A. Rich. Controlling the floor: Parties as procedural coalitions in the house. *American Journal of Political Science*, pages 1340–1375, 1997

[Exercise 2: A few agenda-setting problems.]

Week 9. Committees

Monday

Stewart, Chapter 8.

“The Institutional Foundations of Committee Power,” Kenneth Shepsle and Barry Weingast. (RSW, 41)

Wednesday

“Principals, goals, dimensionality, and Congressional committees,” Forrest Maltzman and Steven Smith. (RSW, 18)

R.L. Hall and F.W. Wayman. Buying time: Moneyed interests and the mobilization of bias in congressional committees. *The American Political Science Review*, pages 797–820, 1990

Week 10. Rules and procedures

Monday

Stewart, Chapter 9.

[Discussion of research papers and strategies for finding a topic.]

Wednesday

“On the Effects of Legislative Rules,” Gary Cox. (RSW, 22)

“Models of Legislative Voting,” John Kingdom. (RSW, 26)

Ideology and other institutions

At this point we expand out from Congress into other domains. How has Congress, and politics more broadly, become polarized over the last few decades? How are interactions with the Senate or the Presidency responsible – or not – for the gridlock so widely decried these days? Here we see Congress situated in its proper context, an important player in a complex political game with the other branches. In many ways, these issues bring us back to the historical context, as models strain to encompass the complexity of fluid rules and norms which appear to change week by week.

Week 11. Polarization

Monday

N.M. McCarty, K.T. Poole, and H. Rosenthal. *Polarized America: The dance of ideology and unequal riches*. MIT Press Cambridge, MA, 2006. Chapters 1-2.

[Paper proposals due.]

Wednesday

McCarty et. al. Chapters 5-7.

Week 12. Senate

Monday

F.E. Lee. *Beyond ideology: politics, principles, and partisanship in the US Senate*. University of Chicago Press, 2009. Chapters 1, 3, 5.

Wednesday

Lee, Chapters 6-8.

Week 13. Congress and the Presidency

Monday

“Pivotal Politics,” Keith Krehbiel. (RSW, 27).

Wednesday

“The Dynamics of Legislative Gridlock,” Sarah Binder. (RSW, 31)

W. Howell, S. Adler, C. Cameron, and C. Riemann. Divided government and the legislative productivity of congress, 1945-94. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, pages 285–312, 2000

[Exercise 3: A few pivotal-politics problems.]

Week 14. Wrap-up and paper discussion.

Monday

Each student should be prepared to discuss his or her final project in some detail, and engage critically but politely with the proposals of others.

Wednesday

A look back over the semester, considering what have learned, and what remains elusive.