

POSC-3214: THE U.S. CONGRESS

Spring 2023

Instructor: Boris Heersink

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Faber Hall 667

Office Hours: Monday 12:30 PM – 2:30 PM, and by appointment on other times

Class Location and Time:

Dealy Hall 101

Mondays and Thursdays, 10:00-11:15 AM

Course Description

Aim of the Course: The U.S. Congress – consisting of the House of Representatives and the Senate – represents the legislative branch of the American federal government. At first glance, its tasks of legislating on relevant issues in American society, passing a budget funding the federal government, and providing oversight of the executive branch may seem straightforward. However, Congress is notoriously unpopular with the public, and it relies on a complex institutional design to execute (or, as the case may be, *fail to execute*) its job. Why does Congress look and function the way it does? The goal of this course is to provide you with a thorough understanding of what Congress's main tasks are, how it attempts to execute those tasks, why it has the institutional design it relies on, what the role of Congressional leaders and political parties is, and how Congress relates to the other branches of the government.

To achieve these goals, we will be reading a number of different perspectives from political scientists who have studied and debated these issues. When reading these works, and when discussing them in class, we will critically assess how political scientists try and answer these questions. In doing so, we will particularly focus on methodological approaches to studying Congress – including how to measure the ideological beliefs of Members of Congress (MCs) or their legislative effectiveness, the use of statistical analysis to assess quantitative data, and the reliance on experiments to test theories about voter preferences in (Congressional) elections. By the end of this course you should have a thorough understanding of political scientists' arguments about Congress and the (quantitative) methodological approaches they rely on in studying this political institution.

Covid Policies

Note: As the Covid pandemic continues and new strains emerge, the university and/or the instructor may update any of the policies outlined below. Make sure you stay up to date on any changes in Covid policies and, if you are at all unsure, please feel free to ask!

As of the writing of this syllabus, the university maintains the same policy on masking as it has since spring 2022. That is, while the university encourages mask use in public spaces, it does not require it. However, individual faculty members *can* mandate mask use in their classes. While for most of us, COVID-19 exposure is increasingly relatively low risk – given the protection provided by vaccination – that risk is not consistent to everybody, for example people with preexisting conditions that put them at risk for serious illness (regardless of vaccination status) or those who have loved ones who fall in that category.

To assess where students fall on this issue, I will be mandating mask use during the first two classes of the semester. After the end of add-drop I will send out a survey to all students asking their position on continued masking. If there are no objections to lifting the mask mandate, students will be free to decide whether or not to wear a mask. If there are objections, the mask mandate will remain in effect. I strongly recommend [using \(K\)N95 masks](#) as [there is plenty of evidence](#) that these masks are much more effective than cloth or general surgical masks in slowing the spread of Covid.

If during the semester you find yourself experiencing symptoms of a possible Covid infection, or if you were in close contact with someone who has Covid, **you should not come to class**. You will not be penalized in any way for missing class for health reasons (Covid or otherwise!). If you find yourself symptomatic or exposed, you should contact Fordham student health services (health@fordham.edu or at 718-817-4160) and get tested. Just let me know you will be absent through email. I am happy to meet with you on Zoom to discuss any material you missed in class.

The pandemic has thus far affected all of us in some way, though the extent to which it has is likely to be different for each of us. However, at this point we are all, if nothing else, tired, frustrated, and facing all types of motivational issues. This is completely understandable. And, of course, some of us may be dealing with much more serious possible issues caused by Covid-19 – including its effect on our own (long and short term) physical and mental health, that of our family and other loved ones, as well as any economic struggles caused by the pandemic. If you are facing issues limiting your ability to participate and perform fully in this course, please do not hesitate to reach out so we can work on solving those problems.

Basic Rules

In-Class: You are expected to be present in class every session, and to participate in Q&A and group activities during class. You should make sure that you come to class having read all the readings for each day, and you should participate actively in our conversation about those readings.

To create an atmosphere in which all students feel comfortable participating and have the ability to achieve their full potential, civility during the discussions is vital. During our

conversations we will inevitably come to talk about day-to-day politics, and it is very much possible that you will find yourself disagreeing strongly with points put forward by your fellow students (and, they with you!). While you should absolutely feel free to challenge other students, it is crucial that you should do so in a respectful way (and, of course, you can expect the same of your fellow students towards you).

Absences: If for some reason you cannot be present for understandable reasons (illness, personal circumstances clearly beyond your control, etc.) you should contact me as soon as you can (if at all possible, before the start of class). In line with Fordham's attendance policy you should report any excused absences with documentation by filling out the [Excused Absence Form](#). I keep attendance and unexcused absences result in a lowering of your participation grade. Note that Fordham's official attendance policy is that for courses that meet twice a week it is not allowed to have more than four absences in total across the course – while having more than four unexcused absences does not automatically result in failing this course, excessive absences make it very difficult to receive a passing grade.

Grade

Course Assignments: Your grade is based on participation in class (15%), a midterm (25%), a final (30%) and a research proposal (30%).

The midterm and final will be in class and will rely on multiple choice questions, ID terms, and one or more open ended essay questions. The midterm will cover the material of the course (both readings and topics discussed in class) up through the midterm date. The final will cover material from the entire course. The midterm will be held in class on **March 6**, the final will be on the time and day scheduled for our class by the university.

The research proposal will exist of a 5-to-6 page double-spaced paper engaging a specific puzzle regarding Congress in relation to the readings you will read in this course. The goal of this paper is for you to come up with a original research question, a set of hypotheses derived from this question, and a research design that – if executed – would allow us to test these hypotheses and answer your question. You will not actually execute the proposal, but the goal is to think critically about what methodological approach would allow you to do so if you would – that is, what data you'd have to collect, how you would do so, etc.

On **March 30**, we will use our class to talk about how to design a research project in political science. We will use part of this time for you to brainstorm and design a research question for the proposal paper. You will be expected to provide me with a basic description of your topic and your research question on **April 2** after which you will receive feedback from me. The paper itself must be submitted on **May 8** as a PDF file on **Blackboard**. Specific guidelines regarding the components of the research design will be distributed after the midterm. However, while doing the readings keep your eye open for a topic you might be interested expanding on for this assignment.

Note that Fordham's Writing Center (in Walsh Library at Rose Hill and in Quinn Library at Lincoln Center) provides individualized assistance to students for writing assignments. You can make an appointment – free of charge! – to meet with someone who will read your paper and discuss it in detail with you. I strongly recommend using this system – especially for your final paper draft, but also for other written assignments before then. You can sign up for an appointment at https://www.fordham.edu/info/20126/writing_center.

For participation, you are expected to actively engage in class discussion during each session. Your physical presence in class is a necessary but insufficient element of participation. That is, if you miss class for unexcused reasons you are not adding to your participation grade. However, being present but not participating does not add much either. The best way to participate is to make sure you have done the readings ahead of class and to answer questions raised by the instructor or other students. Raising your own questions also counts as participation.

Grading Scale and Calculation of Final Course Grade: For the midterm and final exam you can earn up to 100 points. Those points subsequently are converted to a letter grade which builds towards your final course grade in line with the scale below. For participation and your research proposal paper you will receive a single letter grade which also follows the point value outlined below.

Exam Points	Letter Grade	Points toward Final Grade
100-93	A	4.0
92-90	A-	3.7
89-87	B+	3.3
86-83	B	3.0
82-80	B-	2.7
79-77	C+	2.3
76-73	C	2.0
72-70	C-	1.7
69-60	D	1.0
59 and below	F	0.0

Your final grade is based on a weighted average of each of the points earned towards your final grade based on the percentages outlined above. For example, if you received a B+ for your midterm, that earns you $3.3 * 0.25 = 0.825$ points towards your final grade. If you earn an A- for participation this would earn you $3.7 * 0.15 = 0.555$ points towards your final grade. Your final grade is calculated by counting up all those earned points and translated into a letter grade based on the following scale:

Total Earned Final Grade Points	Final Letter Grade
4.0 – 3.84	A
3.83 – 3.50	A-
3.49 – 3.17	B+
3.16 – 2.84	B

2.83 – 2.50	B-
2.49 – 2.17	C+
2.16 – 1.84	C
1.83 – 1.34	C-
1.34 – 1.0	D
0.99 and below	F

Your final grade will be based on your performance on the elements identified above. Extra credit opportunities are unlikely to appear but if they do they will be announced to the entire class. Students will not be able to earn extra credit with individual assignments or activities.

Grade Complaints: I will grade your performance in this course in comparison to your fellow students as well as predetermined expectations. This means that the grade you earn should be a fair representation of how you have performed in comparison both to my general expectations of all participants, as well as your fellow classmates' work in this course.

It is possible that you may be unhappy with a grade, and I am always willing to discuss your progress during the course to help you improve. If you believe the grade you received is an **incorrect** assessment of the quality of the work you produced, you can challenge your grade. If you want to do so, please email me to set up an appointment and send me a copy of your work and a written description explaining in detail why you believe your grade does not accurately represent the quality of the work you submitted. We will subsequently discuss your work and I will assess whether I believe your grade should be changed.

Before you contact me about your grade(s), consider the following things.

First, the goal of a grade reassessment is to produce a grade that is a fair representation of your performance: this means that any errors that lowered your grade will be corrected, but any potential errors that *increased* it will also be adjusted. A re-grading process can thus result in a higher grade, the exact same grade, or a lower grade than what you received through the original grading process.

Second, a grade challenge means you must make a **specific argument** about why you think the grading does not reflect the **quality** of your work. It is not enough to state that you are confused by your grade, or that you feel that it does not reflect the amount of time and effort you put into the course. I understand that both of those feelings can be very frustrating. But they are not arguments for why the grade is not correct, and I will not entertain grading challenges based solely on these arguments.

Third, as you are assessing your work in comparison to the answer keys or my comments, make sure you do not just look at the things you did right. You also have to incorporate those things you missed or got wrong. It is quite common for students who received, for example, an A- to list the things they got right. But those things are what earned you the A-. The question is whether there were things that reasonably cost you enough points to keep you below an A.

Fourth, students sometimes try to ‘challenge’ their grade through a roundabout way – effectively having the instructor defend why they graded the work the way they did. Often, those students do not provide arguments for why they disagree with the grade. If you are unsure what you did wrong and you’d like me to clarify, I am of course always happy to do so. But I will not engage the ‘roundabout grade challenge’: if you think the grade is incorrect, you have to identify what it is you think I did wrong and engage with me on that basis. If you cannot articulate why you think the grade is wrong, then that might just mean it is in fact a correct assessment of your performance.

Finally, grades are not a negotiation. They should reflect the quality of the work you produced. If you believe I made a mistake, you should feel free to challenge the grade. But the correct use of this process is not to look at your different grades at the end of the semester and to try to up one, or multiple, grade(s) with the sole goal of collecting enough points to increase your final letter grade. If you want to ensure you get the highest grade possible I would advise you to spend your time reaching out to me with questions *before* the exams and paper deadline, and not on trying to haggle about a grade afterwards.

Plagiarism and Other Violations of Code of Conduct: All assignments in this course fall under Fordham University’s code of conduct. Any violation (including, but not limited to, cheating on exams, and plagiarism) will result in the student being held accountable to the full extent of university guidelines. Note that this includes self-plagiarism – that is, taking (parts of) assignments you did for other courses and resubmitting them for this course. While self-plagiarism might seem like an innocent act, it means you did not do original work as required for this course. It too can lead to negative consequences, including failing this course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university. If you aren’t sure whether what you are doing is right or not, check in with the writing center or with me!

Office Hours

If you have any questions or want to chat about the course, you can come to my office hours on **Monday between 12:30-2:30** (unless otherwise noted). My office is in 667 Faber Hall. If you want to meet but cannot make that time, send me an e-mail and we will schedule a meeting. You can also e-mail me with any questions or concerns – I try to respond to every e-mail within 24 hours

Notes

Fordham provides me with a class list that includes your legal name. If you prefer to be addressed by an alternate name and/or gender pronoun, please do not hesitate to let me know! You can do so in class, by email, or during an office hour appointment – whichever you are comfortable with. Also, if during the semester I mispronounce your name or use an incorrect gender pronoun please do correct me – I want to get these things right.

Fordham’s Writing Center (in Walsh Library at Rose Hill and in Quinn Library at Lincoln Center) provides individualized assistance to students for writing assignments. You can make an appointment – free of charge! – to meet with someone who will read your paper

and discuss it in detail with you. I strongly recommend using this system. You can sign up for an appointment at https://www.fordham.edu/info/20126/writing_center.

As a faculty member, I am – by law – a mandatory reporter and I am required to contact and provide information to Public Safety, the Dean of Students, or Fordham’s Title IX Coordinator if I am provided with any information indicating that a Fordham student has been sexually harassed (verbally or physically), sexually assaulted, stalked, had domestic violence or dating violence occur in a relationship, or been a victim / survivor of any behavior that is prohibited by Fordham’s Sexual Misconduct Policy and Procedures. Once reported, Fordham will seek to support any student and make efforts to stop the negative behavior, prevent it from recurring, and remedy its effects. It is important for you to be aware that there are three confidential places on campus where you can seek support or guidance from Fordham staff members who are **not** mandatory reporters: clinical counselors in Counseling & Psychological Services, pastoral counselors in Campus Ministry, and medical service providers in University Health Services. You can read more about this in the Student CARE brochure or visit www.fordham.edu/care or www.fordham.edu/sexualmisconduct for more information.

If you or someone you know is struggling with emotional or mental health concerns, and/or gender, sexual, or domestic violence, Fordham’s Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) can provide (free) assistance. The Rose Hill office of CPS is open Monday through Friday and can be reached by phone at 718-817-3725. If you, or a student you know, is experiencing a mental health crisis or emergency that requires immediate attention contact Fordham’s office of Public Safety at Rose Hill at 718-817-2222 (available 24/7). If you prefer to access mental health services outside of Fordham, New York City provides free mental health support through NYC Well (<https://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/>).

Course Materials

Nearly all readings for this course will be made available online through Blackboard. The only exceptions concern:

A. Scott Adler, Jeffery A. Jenkins, and Charles R. Shipan, *The United States Congress* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2nd edition 2021).

The book is available through the Fordham bookstore as well as online sellers. Note that the Fordham bookstore price matches textbooks with Amazon and Barnes and Noble on rentals and purchases.

Course Syllabus

January 19

Topic: Introduction to Political Science and the Study of Congress

Readings: No readings.

January 23

Topic: Constitutional Design of Congress

Readings:

The U.S. Constitution.

Adler et al, *The United States Congress*, Chapter 1.

Sarah A. Binder, *Stalemate: Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), Chapter 1.

January 26

Topic: Studying Congress: The Basics of Rational Choice

Readings:

Kenneth Shepsle, *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior, and Institutions* (2nd edition, 2010), Chapter 2.

January 30

Topic: The Committee System and the Legislative Process

Readings:

Adler et al, *The United States Congress*, Chapter 5.

February 2

Topic: The Electoral Connection and Congressional Elections

Readings:

Mayhew, *Congress*, pp. 1-7, 13-19, 81-105.

Adler et al, *The United States Congress*, Chapter 4.

February 6

Topic: Measuring Ideology: NOMINATE Scores

Readings:

Adler et al, *The United States Congress*, Chapter 2.

Phil Everson, Rick Valelly, Arjun Vishwanath, Jim Wiseman, "NOMINATE and American Political Development: A Primer," *Studies in American Political Development* 30, 2 (2016) 97-115.

February 9

Topic: Measuring Legislative Effectiveness

Readings:

Adler et al, *The United States Congress*, Chapter 8.

Craig Volden and Alan E. Wiseman, *Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014) Chapter 2.

February 13

Topic: Statistical Analysis – A Basic Introduction

Readings:

Craig Volden, Alan E. Wiseman, and Dana E. Wittmer, "Women's Issues and Their Fates in the US Congress," *Political Science Research and Methods* 6, 4 (2018) 679-696.

February 16

Topic: No class due to research travel.

Readings:

No readings.

February 21

Note: This class is on Tuesday as the university is closed on Monday due to President's Day.

Topic: Statistical Analysis Workshop

Readings:

No readings.

February 23

Topic: Experiments – A Basic Introduction

Readings:

Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman, "Campaign Contributions Facilitate Access to Congressional Officials: A Randomized Field Experiment," *American Journal of Political Science* vol. 60, no. 3 (2016) 545-558.

February 27

Topic: Experiments Workshop

Readings:

No readings – we will use today's class to have you prepare your own basic experimental research design.

March 2

Topic: Congressional Design: Firm and Information Theory

Readings:

Barry Weingast and William Marshall, "The Industrial Organization of Congress: Or, Why Legislatures, Like Firms, Are Not Organized as Markets," *Journal of Political Economy* 96 (1998) 135-163.

Keith Krehbiel, *Information and Legislative Organization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), Chapters 3, and 4. (**Note:** The PDF contains Chapter 2 as well, you do not have to read this.)

March 6

Topic: **Midterm Exam**

Readings:

No readings.

March 9

Topic: Representation in Congress

Readings:

Adler et al, *The United States Congress*, Chapter 3.

March 13

Topic: No class due to spring break.

Readings:

No readings.

March 16

Topic: No class due to spring break.

Readings:

No readings.

March 20

Topic: Parties in Congress I

Readings:

Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins, *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993 – 2nd edition, 2007) Chapters 5 and 7.

March 23

Topic: Parties in Congress II

Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins, *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) Chapters 1 and 2.

March 27

Topic: Party Brands

Readings:

Jeffrey D. Grynaviski, *Partisan Bonds: Political Reputations and Legislative Accountability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Chapter 2.

March 30

Topic: Research Design Workshop

Readings:

Lisa A. Baglione, *Writing a Research Paper in Political Science: A Practical Guide to Inquiry, Structure, and Methods* (Sage, 2016) Chapter 7.

April 3

Topic: Descriptive Representation: Race, Gender, Class

Readings:

Jennifer L. Lawless, "Female Candidates and Legislators," *Annual Review of Political Science* vol. 18 (2015) 349-366.

April 6

Topic: No class due to Easter break.

Readings:

No readings.

April 10

Topic: No class due to Easter break.

Readings:

No readings.

April 13

Topic: Congress and the President

Readings:

Adler et al, *The United States Congress*, Chapter 9.

April 17

Topic: Congress and Bureaucracy

Readings:

Adler et al, *The United States Congress*, Chapter 10.

Mathew D. McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz, "Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols Versus Fire Alarms," *American Journal of Political Science* 28 (1984) 165-79.

April 20

Topic: Divided Government: Divided We Govern

Readings:

David R. Mayhew, *Divided We Govern: Party Control, Lawmaking, and Investigations, 1946-2002* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, 2nd edition, 2005), Chapters 1, 3, and 7.

April 24

Topic: Divided Government II

Readings:

Sarah A. Binder, *Stalemate: Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), Chapters 3, and 4.

April 27

Topic: Divided Government III

Readings:

Keith Krehbiel, *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), Chapter 2.

May 1

Topic: Catch-up day and Q&A

Readings:

No readings.