GVPT 473: THE U.S. CONGRESS

Spring 2017   Professor Frances Lee   Office location: TYD 3140N
T/Th 11AM-12:15PM  301-405-4339 (Office)   Office hours: T/Th 1:30-3:30
TYD 0102   Flee1@umd.edu   and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is a comprehensive introduction to the workings of the contemporary U.S. Congress. We will examine who runs for and who wins seats in Congress, the lawmaking processes in the House and Senate, and the roles of parties and leaders in the two chambers. We will take stock of the changes in the operation of the House and Senate, especially problems associated with extended debate in the Senate. We will focus on Congress’s role as a policymaker. How does Congress make public policy? What factors inhibit legislative productivity? Who has input into the process? Finally, we will assess the performance of Congress. Is policymaking too partisan? Is the public’s disapproval of Congress justified?

REQUIRED TEXTS


Selected readings available online via ELMS (www.elms.umd.edu). Most of the readings will be from McKeldin Library’s electronic course reserves, which can be accessed under the “Modules” tab on the site. Some other readings are available in hyperlinks embedded below.

ASSIGNMENTS

- Midterm examination: 25%
- Group project: 10%
- Reading Quizzes (6): 15%
- Term Paper: 20%
- Final examination: 30%

READING & READING QUIZZES

Reading assignments are specified on a calendar in this syllabus. Students will be expected to have completed the assigned reading before coming to class.

Reading quizzes will be given at the beginning of class on the days we discuss some of the most important readings for the course. Quiz dates are noted on the attached schedule. These quizzes will be short and completed in the first 5 minutes of class. Students’ lowest quiz grade will be dropped.
EXAMINATIONS

Examinations will include both objective components (multiple choice or short identification items) and essays. Students will be provided with review materials to aid in preparation for the exams.

A make-up exam will only be given if justified by a written excuse accompanied by appropriate documentation. The following are legitimate reasons for requesting a make-up exam: illness (self or dependent), religious observance, participation in university sponsored activities, or compelling circumstances beyond a student’s control. If none of these apply, no make-up exam will be granted.

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Course grades will be adversely affected by lack of attendance.

0-3 absences.......... no penalty on grade
4+ absences .......... 3 points subtracted from course grade for each unexcused absence after 3. (An excused absence requires written documentation verifying the reason for the absence—e.g., a doctor’s note or letter describing your participation in university-approved activities. A phone call or e-mail to the instructor is not enough to excuse the absence.)

Students are expected to engage with class while attending lectures and discussion section meetings. This means refraining from web surfing, texting, emailing, etc.

GROUP PROJECTS

Students will be assigned to one of the group projects listed below.

Communications Strategy Project—February 28, 2017
Students assigned to this project will be divided in two teams. Each team will act as consultants to advise a member of Congress—Mike Coffman (R-Co.)—on how to enhance his communications with constituents.

The communications strategy should do three things:
1) diagnose communications challenges the member faces,
2) identify the key groups he needs to target and ways to reach them, and
3) articulate the major message(s) he needs to communicate.

Each team will have 15 minutes to make its “pitch.” Feel free to use whatever bells and whistles (handouts, multimedia, etc.) in your presentation that might help you sell your strategy. The team can allocate presentation responsibilities in whatever way makes sense, provided that each student speaks to the class at some point.

After each presentation, the class will pose questions to the teams of consultants. At the end of class, they will also vote on which team developed the better communications strategy.

Legislative Portfolio Project—March 7, 2017
Students assigned to this project will be divided into two teams. Each will be asked to act as consultants hired to advise Sen. Chris Van Hollen, Jr. (D-MD) on developing a legislative initiative that will raise his profile both in the Senate and at home.

1) Identify and explain one major legislative initiative that will draw favorable attention in Congress and the state,
2) Articulate an argument for pushing the issue (Why is it timely now? How does it fit in with or develop the senator’s image?), and
3) Provide advice on what the senator can do to push the issue in the current congressional environment.

Each team will have 15 minutes to make its “pitch.” Feel free to use whatever bells and whistles (handouts, multimedia, etc.) in your presentation that might help you sell your strategy. The team can allocate presentation responsibilities in whatever way it chooses, provided that each person speaks to the class.

After each presentation, the class will pose questions to the teams of advisors. At the end of class, they will also vote on which team developed the better legislative portfolio.
Debates
For each debate, students will be divided into two teams, one taking the affirmative position on the resolution, the other arguing against it. Each debate team will assign its own members’ duties and responsibilities. (Each member is required to actively participate).

Debate Format
The debate will be chaired by a student volunteer who is not a member of either debate team. The chair’s duties include keeping debaters to time limits, keeping order on the panel, and recognizing questions from the floor during question time.
The debates will start with brief opening statements (7 minute limit) from each team. Then each team will offer a rebuttal of the others arguments (3 minute limit). Each team will then offer a closing statement (2 minute limit). At the conclusion of the debate, the two teams will answer questions from the floor.

The class will vote on which team was more convincing in making its case.

On Senate filibuster — May 4, 2017
The debate will center on this question: Should Senate procedures be reformed so that a simple majority can bring debate to a close? Team 1 will argue “yes” and Team 2 will argue “no.”

On Congress’s role in military affairs—May 9, 2017
The debate will focus on this question: Does the contemporary Congress fulfill its constitutional responsibilities over military affairs? Team 1 will argue “yes” and Team 2 will argue “no.”

RESEARCH PAPER:
Write a 10-page research paper on one of the topics below. Papers should be double-spaced in 12-point font, with one inch margins. A separate cover page should include the student’s name, date, the title of the paper, and the Honor Code pledge. Papers are due at the start of class on May 2, 2017. Students must document all sources used in writing the research paper according to an accepted style guide.

Topic 1: Representation
Choose two members of Congress (House or Senate) from the same state. Compare and contrast their home styles and Washington styles. How are their “presentations of self” and choices in Washington shaped by electoral results, the nature of their district or state (homogeneity, heterogeneity, partisanship, etc.) and/or prior political experience?

Topic 2: Leadership
Choose a leader in the contemporary Congress (Senate majority or minority leader or House Speaker, majority leader or minority leader). Analyze his/her leadership style. How centralized is decision making in the party under his/her leadership? What resources does the leader possess to influence the legislative process? What are the constraints and difficulties that the leader faces? Provide illustrative examples in your response to each of these questions.

Topic 3: Committee Decision Making
Choose a standing committee of Congress (either House or Senate) to analyze. Identify its agenda in recent congresses. What are the goals and policy preferences of its membership? Does the committee’s membership appear to be representative of the larger chamber? Describe the character of decision making on the committee. Is it bipartisan or partisan? Centralized or decentralized?
**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:**

Students with disabilities who are registered with Disability Support Services (301-314-7682) are encouraged to meet with the instructor early in the semester to arrange appropriate academic accommodations.

**INCLEMENT WEATHER**

Exams will be rescheduled for the next class meeting if the university is officially closed because of inclement weather. Similarly, any assignments due should be turned in at the next class meeting. Official closures and delays are announced on the campus website (http://www.umd.edu/) and snow phone line (301-405-SNOW), as well as local radio and TV stations.

**ACADEMIC HONESTY & HONOR CODE PLEDGE:**

The University of Maryland, College Park has a Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information, please visit http://www.shc.umd.edu/SHC/Default.aspx.

Academic honesty is taken very seriously in this course. Plagiarism and any other infractions will be taken up with the appropriate university judicial proceedings.

Students should write and sign the following statement on the cover page of each paper they submit in this course, “I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this assignment.”
SCHEDULE OF LECTURES & ASSIGNMENTS

PART ONE: REPRESENTATION AND ELECTIONS

01/26 (TH): Introduction and Congress over time
READ: C&M chapters 1 and 2

01/31 (T): Political ambition
READ: C&M chapter 3
Greenfield, Meg, Washington (New York: Public Affairs), 21-54. (ELMS)

02/02 (TH): Political ambition
Thomsen, Danielle M. “Ideological Moderates Won’t Run” Journal of Politics 76 (July 2014): 786-797. (ELMS)

READING QUIZ

02/07 (T): Congressional elections and incumbency advantage

02/09 (TH): Congressional campaigns (ALP)
Video: “The Political Education of Maggie Lauterer”

02/14 (T): Congressional elections
READ: C&M chapter 4

READING QUIZ

02/16 (TH): Representation
READ: C&M chapter 5

02/21 (T): Topic continued

READING QUIZ

PART TWO: CONGRESSIONAL ORGANIZATION AND PROCEDURES

02/23 (TH): Legislative process and strategy
READ: C&M chapter 8
02/28 (T): Congressional committees  
READ: C&M chapter 7  
FIRST GROUP PROJECT: Communications strategy

02/02 (TH): House floor procedure  

03/07 (T): Senate floor procedure  
SECOND GROUP PROJECT: Legislative portfolio

03/09 (TH): Congressional parties & polarization  

03/14 (T): MIDTERM EXAM

03/16 (TH): Visit to class from former Rep. Martin Frost (D-TX) and Tom Davis (R-VA)

03/21 (T): SPRING BREAK

03/23 (TH): SPRING BREAK

03/28 (T): Leadership in the House and Senate  
READ: C&M chapter 6  

READING QUIZ

03/30 (TH): Topic continued  
READ: Selections from Master of the Senate by Caro (ELMS)

PART THREE: CONGRESSIONAL POLICYMAKING

04/04 (T): Lobbyists’ influence  
READ: C&M chapter 13  

04/06 (TH): Individual members in the power structure (ALP)  
READ: C&M, Chapter 9  

04/11 (T): The president’s influence  
READ: C&M chapter 10  
04/13 (TH): Interbranch relationships
READ: C&M chapters 11 & 12

READING QUIZ

04/18 (T): Effects of divided government

04/20 (TH): Bargaining and negotiation

04/25 (T): Congressional budgeting
READ: C&M chapter 14

PART FOUR: ASSESSING CONGRESS

04/27 (TH): Is Congress responsive to the American public?
Strategy memos by Frank Luntz (under “Assignments” on ELMS course website)

READING QUIZ

05/02 (T): Public Assessments of Congress
DUE: RESEARCH PAPERS

05/04 (TH): Does Senate procedure need reform?

THIRD GROUP PROJECT: Debate on the Senate Filibuster

05/11 (T): Assessing Congress’s Role in American Democracy
READ: C&M chapters 16

5/13 (SAT) FINAL EXAM, 8:00AM-10:00AM