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? Narrow economic interests or broader general interests? Positive theory, which is the dominant theoretical approach to studying Congress, 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 2012, especially how they are working (or not) with President Obama 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 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 2012 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 books are required for the course and are available for purchase at the University of Wisconsin Bookstore:


There also is a set of readings that will be available on Moodle. 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 read a good daily newspaper, or at least a news weekly. The New York Times is available at 60% off the cover price to all UW students. I encourage you to subscribe if you do not already have access to high quality national news. 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 Online: The Newspaper of Capitol Hill Since 1955 and The Hill: The Newspaper for and about the U.S. Congress. They may be found online at http://www.rollcall.com and http://www.thehill.com. You have to subscribe to Roll Call to get the full text of articles, but The Hill is still available for free. You may also find it entertaining and informative to tune into CSPAN’s coverage of Congress. You will learn a lot about the legislative process by watching it unfold in real time. Other good resources are nationaljournal.com (free) and Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report (you have to subscribe to get on-line access, but there are hard copies in the libraries).

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 a fair amount of 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.

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.

Course Outline: (lecture outlines will be posted on my web site http://users.polisci.wisc.edu/dcanon/)
I. Introduction: Normative and Positive Theories of Congress and Overview

A. Overview of Congress and Introduction to the course: September 4

*American Congress*, Chapter 1, pp. 1-27.

B. Member Goals, Resources, and Strategy: September 6

*American Congress*, Chapter 4, pp. 91-124.

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

*American Congress*, first part of Chapter 2, pp. 29-top of 33.
David Canon, *Race, Redistricting and Representation*, Preface -Chapter 1, xi-59.

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

*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, Moodle.

II. History and Evolution of Congress

A. Constitutional Foundations: September 20

*American Congress*, second part of Chapter 2, pp. 33-44.
Charles Stewart, “Congress and the Constitutional System,” Moodle.

B. Evolution of Congress: September 25-27

*American Congress*, last part of Chapter 2, pp. 44-53.


III. Getting Elected

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

*American Congress*, first part of Chapter 3, pp. 55-70.


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

*American Congress*, last part of Chapter 3, pp. 81-89.


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

*American Congress*, middle part of Chapter 3, pp. 70-81.


******** In Class Midterm Exam on Thursday, October 18th ********
(exam will cover readings through October 11th)
IV. Inside Congress: Institutions of Congress

A. Committees – October 23-25


B. Parties and Party Leadership – October 30-November 1


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

*American Congress*, Chapters 7 and 8, pp. 217-75.
Canon, Chapter 4, “Race and Representation in the U.S. House of Representatives,” 143-200.

VI. Budget Politics and Oversight – November 13-15

Paul Ryan, “President's Budget Charts Path to Debt and Decline,” House Budget Committee And Senate Budget Committee Republican Summary Of President’s FY2013 Budget February 13, 2012, Moodle.

VII. Links to the Constituency – November 20-27

*American Congress*, Chapter 11, pp. 349-76.
Cato Institute, “Earmarks are a Symptom of the Problem,” February 7th, 2012, Moodle.
Eliza Newlin Carney, “The War On Earmarks Moves To The Obama Era: McCain, Feingold and Other Soldiers In The Battle Against Pork Look To Renew Their Efforts,” *National
David Sirota, “Reform To Nowhere: How the crusade against earmarks threatens constitutional democracy.” In These Times, April 27, 2009, Moodle.

*** Thanksgiving Break – No Class on November 25 ***

VIII. Congress and the Courts – November 29

American Congress, Chapter 10, pp. 319-47.

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

American Congress, Chapter 9, pp. 277-316.

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

X. Congressional Legitimacy, the Future, and Reform – December 11-13

Canon, Chapter 6, “Black Majority Districts,” 243-64.
Also review the last section of the “Running Scared” article from a couple of weeks ago

*** Final Exam on Tuesday, December 18th. 12:25 p.m. - 2:25 p.m., location to be announced ***