



PS 140A: National Institutions: Congress

Tuesday and Thursday, 3:30pm-4:45pm

Bunche 2209A

Instructor: Dr. Ajax Peris

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Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday, 1:30-2:30pm (or by appointment)

Office: 4250 Bunche Hall

Purpose of the Course

The purpose of this course is to develop a broad understanding of Congress as an institution. We will focus on numerous big questions: Who runs for Congress? How do they win? How are laws supposed to be made? How are they *really* made? How do the rules and procedures of Congress affect policy outcomes? Why is Congress so unpopular yet incumbents are reelected more than 90% of the time? How does money affect Congress? What role do political parties have in our nation's legislature? The goal of this course is to come away with a deeper understanding of the complexities of Congressional politics beyond the conflict-driven coverage they receive in the media and appreciate how research on Congress applies to American politics today.

Course Requirements

Attendance:

Some material for exams may be discussed in lecture but not covered in the readings. You are responsible for all material in assigned readings and discussed in class. While lecture attendance is not mandatory, choosing to miss a lesson can be costly in terms of your grade. If you miss a lecture, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed, regardless of the reason for your absence.

Textbooks: (Available at the UCLA Bookstore)

TAC: The American Congress (9th Edition)

by Steven S. Smith, Jason M. Roberts, Ryan J. Vander Wielen, 2015

CTFB: Congress: The First Branch

by Benjamin Ginsberg and Kathryn Wagner Hill, 2019

Additional readings may be distributed as PDF documents via the course webpage. You are responsible for having the appropriate software to view these materials.

Current Events

Many of the elements of Congressional activity that we will discuss in this course will be playing out in real time during the term: You'll have an opportunity to see politics in action as we learn about it. Your familiarity with current events in American politics will greatly enhance your understanding of the course material, plus it will help you participate in class discussions. You should keep up with current events through various news sources.

The way news is consumed and produced is changing along with technologies that make data easier to collect, store, and analyze. Below are a few recommended resources to help you gather political news.

- Google News – Google aggregates news from a multitude of sources, and it even provides multiple sources for any given news story.
- Twitter – Many political reporters rely on Twitter to communicate with one another and with news consumers. I recommend opening a Twitter account and following a few political reporters and political scientists. Some suggestions:
 - Ezra Klein, David Leonhardt, Vox.com, The Upshot, John Dickerson, Chuck Todd, Lynn Vavreck, Michael Ross, Nate Cohn, John Sides, Maggie Haberman, Jake Tapper, Katy Tur, John Ray, Daniel Drezner.
 - *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*

Discussion Forums

Questions about course material, assignments, readings, etc., are best and most quickly addressed via the online discussion forum on the class web page. Use this forum to get answers to your questions, whether those answers come from me or from other students. I monitor the discussion and check daily for questions that need answers or clarification.

You are always welcome to come to my office hours if you need personal advice or additional help understanding course material. I welcome the chance to meet each of you, but if you have a question about the course, the answer to which could benefit others in the class, please post it to the discussion board and it will be answered quickly.

Homework Assignments – Congressional Committees

There are 20 standing committees in the House and another 16 in the Senate. Just about all the legislation that reaches a final floor vote in either house is a product of those committees and their numerous subcommittees. Each Thursday, beginning Week 2, your assignment is to prepare a 2-3 page profile of a standing committee of your choosing. You will profile a different committee each week. There are seven assignments during the term.

Your profile should describe the committee's purpose, recent agenda, legislation that has passed and failed during the current Congress, and the responsibilities of some of its subcommittees. You can also discuss the committee members and the type of decision-making that goes on (bipartisan/partisan, centralized/decentralized, etc.).

You might find these websites helpful in your research:

<https://www.congress.gov/committees>

<https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record>

<http://congressionaldigest.com/issue/gun-control/>

https://www.senate.gov/legislative/legislative_home.htm

<https://www.house.gov/legislative-activity>

<https://www.c-span.org/congress/>

Quizzes

Throughout the term, I will make available seven on-line quizzes over material in the readings. The quizzes are OPTIONAL.

- They will be open book, but they will also be time-limited.
- If you elect to take the quizzes (you have to take at least five of the seven to get credit), your highest five grades on them will be incorporated into your overall course grade.
- You will not be penalized for not taking the quizzes.
- If your quiz score would lower your overall grade, I will not include it.
- Bottom line, the quizzes can ONLY help you to get a higher grade, to be prepared for class, and to be prepared for exams.

Turning in Assignments

All written assignments will be submitted electronically as PDF documents to the appropriate link on the course page. It is your responsibility to ensure you have the software to publish a PDF. Please do not email your papers. The electronic document shall be formatted such that, when printed, it meets the formatting instructions posted on the course website. I expect your papers to be correctly formatted and to have correct spelling and grammar.

Late Work

In general,* assignments are due at the beginning of class on the due date, unless an alternate due date/time is given. Any work submitted late receives a penalty of one letter grade for every day it is late (starting immediately after the work is due). The only acceptable excuses for late work are 1) a note from a UCLA administrator, or 2) a note from a doctor documenting an illness that prevented you from completing the assignment. Computer crashes, network outages, and software problems are not excusable. You may submit your work late, but you pay a price of one letter grade per day on the assignment.

* “Life Happens”: One time during this term, you may use the “life happens” excuse to turn in any single assignment late, no questions asked, and receive no penalty. This provision does not apply to quizzes or exams, and it expires at 11:59pm on Friday, March 13, after which any work that hasn’t been submitted will receive a zero grade. To use this provision, you do not need to tell me in advance that you intend to submit a late assignment. When you are ready to submit the assignment, you will:

1. Send me an email with the subject “Life Happens”, and identify which assignment you are turning in late without penalty
2. Submit the work via the normal CCLE link for that assignment

Failure to follow these instructions may result in your assignment not being graded at all.

Grading

This course will have seven homework assignments, seven optional quizzes, one in-class exam, and a final exam. Your grade will be determined by weighing each assignment as follows:

	Without Quizzes	With Quizzes
• Mid-term Exam	33%	25%
• Final Exam	34%	30%
• Homework Assignments (7)	33%	25%
• Quizzes (7)	NA	20%

Academic Honesty

All of the work you do in this course is expected to be your own. I encourage you to discuss matters relating to this course with other classmates, friends, family members, and students, but your papers and exam answers must be your own ideas and your own words. If you are having trouble completing a paper, contact me or the UCLA Undergraduate Writing Center for help before you resort to the use of someone else's words or ideas without proper attribution. If you are unfamiliar with the University's policy on academic dishonesty and associated penalties, see <http://www.deanofstudents.ucla.edu>.

Lying to a faculty member about anything relating to this course constitutes academic dishonesty and requires reporting to the Dean and can result in possible suspension or dismissal.

Learning Disabilities

Students with university-documented learning disabilities should inform me as soon as possible of their needs. This is especially important if you need accommodations in class or require more time for exams. You will also need to contact the Center for Accessible Education (<https://www.cae.ucla.edu/>, A255 Murphy Hall). You cannot tell us you have a learning disability or schedule a special exam period on the day before the exam. We won't be able to accommodate you on such short notice.

Office Hours

You can visit me in office hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 1:30 and 2:30pm. If you have a class conflict with that time, you may email me to request to meet at an alternate time. My office is in Bunche Hall, room 4250.

Electronics in Class

You may use laptop computers, tablets, or other notetaking devices in class so long as they don't disturb others (Type quietly!). All electronic devices should be in SILENT mode during class.

Schedule of the Course

Day	Topic	Reading	Assignment Due
Week 1 – Tues Jan 7	Congress 101	CTFB Chapter 1	ISideWith.com
Week 1 – Thurs Jan 9	Characteristics of Congress	TAC Chapter 1 TAC Chapter 2	
Week 2 – Tues Jan 14	History of Congressional Power	CTFB Chapter 2	Quiz #1
Week 2 – Thurs Jan 16	Congressional Elections	TAC Chapter 3 <i>Optional: CTFB Ch 3</i>	Homework #1
Week 3 – Tues Jan 21	The Congressperson’s Perspective	TAC Chapter 4	Quiz #2
Week 3 – Thurs Jan 23	Organization: Parties and Committees	CTFB Chapter 4 TAC Chapter 5, 6	Homework #2
Week 4 – Tues Jan 28			Quiz #3
Week 4 – Thurs Jan 30	Legislative Process	CTFB Chapter 5	Homework #3
Week 5– Tues Feb 4	Rules of Legislation Case Study - CRA	TAC Chapter 7	Quiz #4
Week 5 – Thurs Feb 6	Floor Voting	TAC Chapter 8	Homework #4
Week 6 – Tues Feb 11	Midterm Exam		
Week 6 – Thurs Feb 13	Congress and the President	TAC Chapter 9	
Week 7 – Tues Feb 18		CTFB Chapter 6	Quiz #5

Week 7 – Thurs Feb 20	Making Foreign Policy	CTFB Chapter 7	Homework #5
Week 8 – Tues Feb 25	The Bureaucracy	CTFB Chapter 8	Quiz #6
Week 8 – Thurs Feb 27	Congress and the Courts	CTFB Chapter 9	Homework #6
Week 9 – Tues Mar 3		TAC Chapter 10	Quiz #7
Week 9 – Thurs Mar 5	Lobbyists and Interest Groups	TAC Chapter 11	Homework #7
Week 10 – Tues Mar 10	Making a Budget	TAC Chapter 12	
Week 10 – Thurs Mar 12	Reflections on Congress	CTFB Chapter 10	
Final Exam Thurs, Mar 19, 3-6pm			