Course Overview

The modern Congress is often criticized for being too partisan, inefficient, and beholden to special interests. This seminar will examine the development of the modern Congress by focusing on the history of congressional reform. We will also evaluate proposals for reforming the modern Congress to remedy potential shortcomings in the lawmaking and ethics process. Students will write an original research paper on the topic of congressional reform.

Course Objectives

At the end of this course students will:

1) Better understand the development of the modern Congress.
2) Better understand the conditions under which reforms are more likely to succeed or fail.
3) Better understand the feasibility and implications of existing reform proposals.
4) Have a polished piece of original research on the topic of congressional reform.

Course Structure

Course sessions will be almost entirely discussion based. I may do some short lectures at various points during the semester if more background is needed on a topic. Since the course will be mostly discussion based, it is incumbent upon all participants to show up ready and willing to engage in thoughtful discussion of the material. That means students should do the required reading before class and be prepared to analyze the arguments, evidence, strengths, and shortcomings of the pieces we read. I will also post some “questions to ponder” online before each class session so that we can come in with a few pre-set things to discuss, although I want people to feel free to raise other questions and points.

Required Books


**Course Website**

You can access the course website through moodle.wesleyan.edu. Please check the course website regularly (i.e. at least twice a week).

**Assignments**

**Participation (15%)**: Seminars operate best when everyone participates, so you should be prepared to participate in class discussion each week. It is expected that you will attend every class session and arrive on time. Excessive lateness (10+ minutes) or unexcused absences will hurt your participation grade. Excused absences are reserved for documented medical emergencies, family emergencies, or university events. On March 4 I will give you a midterm assessment of your participation.

**Reaction Papers (15%)**: A short reaction paper covering the readings is due every class session except May 6. See the reaction paper guidelines handout for more instructions. Reaction papers are due at the start of class (either hardcopy or uploaded to Moodle). Reaction papers turned in after 1:30 p.m. will not be accepted for credit.

**Topic (5%)**: A brief (1-2 paragraph) statement of the topic for your research paper is due by Feb. 21 by 5 p.m. (on Moodle). Students may be asked to resubmit this assignment if for some reason their initial topic proposal isn’t feasible (e.g., research can’t be done in a semester, topic is too broad, etc.)

**Literature Review (10%)**: A draft of the literature review section of your final paper is due April 4 by 5 p.m. Each student will meet with Professor Dancey sometime April 9, 10, or 14 to discuss his/her literature review and progress on final paper. More information on what the substance and style of your literature review should look like will come in a separate handout.

**Rough Draft/Peer review (15%)**: A rough draft of your research paper is due Thursday, May 1 at 5 p.m. Students will meet in groups of 3-4 students on May 6 to review one another’s work. Students will be responsible for reading the rough drafts of group members and completing a peer review assignment prior to class on May 6.

**Final Paper (30%)**: Your final paper is due by 5 p.m. on Wednesday, May 16.

**Presentation (10%)**: Students will present the findings from their research during the scheduled final exam time (7-10 p.m. on Thursday, May 17).
Key Dates

Feb. 21: Topic due by 5 p.m. on Moodle  
April 4: Literature review due by 5 p.m.  
April 9, 10, or 14: Meet with Professor Dancey to discuss lit review/paper  
May 1: Rough draft due by 5 p.m.  
May 6: Peer review  
May 16: Final draft due by 5 p.m.  
May 17: Presentations

Late Assignments

I will not accept reaction papers for credit after 1:30 p.m. the day they are due. You will also not be able to make up your presentation if you miss the day you are scheduled to present.

Late research paper assignments (i.e., topic, lit review, rough draft, final draft) will lose 2/3 of a letter grade (e.g., a B+ becomes B-) for each day they are late. An assignment is considered one day late if it is submitted more than 10 minutes after the stated deadline. The assignment becomes two days late 24 hours after the deadline, 3 days late after 48 hours, 4 days late after 72 hours, and 5 days late after 96 hours. Assignments over five days late will not be accepted for credit.

Contacting the Instructor

I encourage you to contact me with questions and concerns about the course content and assignments. Please refer to me as Professor Dancey in all correspondence. In general, if you have a clarification question you can reach me over e-mail or on my office phone. Questions about course material, grades, or how to structure your research paper are best dealt with in office hours where we can have a more productive conversation than over e-mail. If my office hours do not work for you because of your class schedule, work schedule, or another important commitment, I am also available by appointment. I cannot guarantee that if you e-mail me shortly before an assignment is due that I will be able to answer your questions, so please make sure and e-mail me early if you have a time-specific question.

Contested Grades

If you wish to contest a grade you must submit a written explanation of why you believe the grade is inaccurate within two weeks of getting the assignment back. You must wait 24 hours from the time the assignment is returned before you submit the written explanation. I will not discuss grades until 24 hours after the assignment is passed back. If you ask me to reevaluate your grade then I reserve the right to either raise or lower your grade based on my reevaluation. This policy is meant to address disagreements with my assessment of your work. It does not pertain to calculation errors on my part. If you believe I have made a mistake adding up points, converting your points to a percentage, etc. you can let me know immediately, and I will be happy to correct any mistakes.
Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a documented disability as defined by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and provide documentation of the disability. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Disability Resources as soon as possible.

If you believe that you need accommodations for a disability, please contact Dean Patey in Disability Resources, located in North College, Room 021, or call 860-685-2332 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations.

Technology in the Classroom

You may use laptops or tablets in class for note taking purposes only. Refrain from using these devices for Facebook, instant messenger, e-mail checking, or anything else that may distract you, your fellow students, or me. It is obvious when someone is using his or her laptop for non-class related activities, and I reserve the right to discontinue the use of laptops (unless you contact me about an exception) if they become a distraction. Texting is not permitted during class.

Academic Integrity

I take plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct seriously. Please see this helpful website: http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/studenthandbook/standardsregulations/plagiarism.html

Suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Honor Board. I expect students to follow the Wesleyan honor code, which can be found here: http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/honorboard/honorcode.html
Course Schedule:

Readings noted with an asterisk (*) are from assigned books. The rest of the material can be found on Moodle or by going to the url listed next to the reading.

January 28—An Introduction to Current Debates


Feb. 4—Members’ Goals


Feb. 11—Collective Action in Congress


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1 I reserve the right to make modifications to the course schedule during the semester. If I make changes I will both announce them in class and on the website.

Feb. 18—Congressional Change, Day I


Feb. 21 (Topic due by 5 p.m.)

Feb. 25—Congressional Change, Day II


March 4—“Failed” Reforms


March 11—Spring Break!

March 18—Spring Break!

March 25—Fixing Congress

• Read all entries in Boston Review’s “Fixing Congress” Forum: http://www.bostonreview.net/cooper-fixing-congress

• “Look at Make Congress Work!” Proposals from No Labels: http://www.nolabels.org/work

April 1—Fixing Elections to Fix Polarization


April 4—Literature Review Due

April 8—Reforming the Senate/Filibuster

http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2010/04/22-filibuster-binder


April 15—Corruption and the Appearance of Corruption


**April 22—Campaign Finance**

• Lessig, 89-317.


**April 29—Is Congress Responsive?**


• Dancey, Logan. Working Papers, TBD.

**May 1—Rough Draft Due by 5 p.m.**

**May 6—Peer review sessions**

• In-class peer review session followed by course wrap-up

**Wednesday, May 14, 5 p.m.**

• Final papers due

**Thursday, May 15, 7-10 p.m.**

• Paper Presentations