

PLSC 277

Congress: Analyzing Legislative Politics

Spring 2024 Yale University

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Two 50 min lectures + one section

COURSE SUMMARY

A data science and case study approach to what is arguably the most powerful legislature in the world.

¹ The actions – and inaction – of the U.S. Congress affect taxes, healthcare, business, the environment, and international politics. To understand the nature of legislative power in Congress and in democracies more broadly, we ask: How do successful politicians become powerful? How do they navigate rules and institutions to their advantage? What is the proper role of lawmaking in regulating private business, and the proper role of lobbying in crafting legislation? Can the passage of bills and the re-election of politicians be statistically predicted? Case studies include the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and the Affordable Care Act under Obama.

Students will choose one of two sections: a *data science-intensive section* and a regular section, referred to as *case-intensive section* in this class.

- Students in the *data science intensive section* (DS) will learn how to collect and code with quantitative data related to Congress and elections in R.
- Students in the *case study intensive section* (CS) will not be required to code, but often discuss one additional case reading that enhances understanding of the core content. Assignments will still include data interpretation exercises using spreadsheets.

The goal of this class is to equip students with a concrete understanding of the principles of politics and domestic public policy, using Congress as an important case. The choice of section will allow you to specialize in the skills you get out of the course.

¹ Assistant Professor of Political Science, Yale University. <https://www.shirokuriwaki.com>. This syllabus borrows content and reading especially from “Seminar in Political Ambition” (Princeton, by Frances Lee), “Ethics of Elections” (Stanford, by Emilee Chapman), and “Congress: Power and Preferences” (Harvard, by Jim Snyder). I thank the instructors of these courses for sharing some of their course material with me. If you would to see any course material including problem sets, please contact me.

Prerequisites: No prior knowledge about U.S. law or history is necessary. For DS students, prior experience (or concurrent enrollment) in programming, coding, or data science is beneficial, but not a prerequisite. DS students without coding experience should be prepared to spend extra time on coding during the first half of our class.

COURSE STRUCTURE AND ASSESSMENT

About 50 percent of the grade will be based on shared lecture and assignments. The remainder depends on whether you are in the data science (DS) intensive section or the case study (CS) intensive section.

- Participation (20%): Attendance, participation in section,
- Assignments (30%): Four assignments spread out across the semester. Each assignment will have questions common to all sections, but will include questions that specialize in the following way:
 - DS: Coding of data analysis of election statistics, roll call vote data, FEC data, maps, and public opinion.
 - CS: interpretation of graphs, and additional reading responses
- Midterm Paper (15%): Analysis of ACA provisions and negotiations based on the Cohn ACA case
- In-class Quizzes (15%): Two in-class quizzes on key features of Congress and gist of readings.
 - There will be two quizzes and their grades are weighted so that we factor improvement. One quiz (y_1) will be on week 4 and the other on week 12 (y_2). The quiz scores will be weighted as: $\max\{\frac{1}{3}y_1 + \frac{2}{3}y_2, y_2\}$.
- Final Paper (20%):
 - A paper that uses quantitative data (DS) or additional reading (CS) to describe the voting record of a member of Congress or a policy area. Assessed on presentation and interpretation of data, and new evidence the student brings. Due at the end of reading period

BOOKS AND COURSE MATERIAL

These books should be obtained by the student:

- Our textbook: *Analyzing Congress* (2015), by Charles Stewart III. 2nd Edition. Necessary chapters are scanned on Canvas, but full book is recommended.
- For the midterm paper: *The Ten Year War: Obamacare and the Unfinished Crusade for Universal Coverage* (2021), by Jonathan Cohn. (TTYW). Full book needs to be purchased by student. The Yale Bookstore will soon have copies, although Amazon is cheaper. The Marx Library will have 2 copies on 24 hour reserve.
- Data Science: Coding will rely on Wickham's *R for Data Science*, second edition.

Electronic versions of other readings will be made available through Course Reserves. They include:

- *Master Of The Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson*. (2003), by Robert Caro
- *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932–1965* (2016), by Eric Schickler
- *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (2016), by Frances Lee
- *The Waxman Report: How Congress Really Works*. (2010), by Henry Waxman
- *Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide* (2019), by Jonathan Rodden.
- “Should Blacks represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Conditional Yes.” (1999) *Journal of Politics*, by Jane Mansbridge

SCHEDULE

See Canvas calendar for up-to-date course readings and links.

Class	Topic	Readings, Discussion Questions	DUE
1.1	Course Intro	Why study Congress? Congressional authority, US policy outcomes in comparative perspective <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Glassman, “Why Congress doesn’t always do the right thing,” <i>New York Times</i>, Feb. 2018 	
1.2	The Median Voter	Majority rule equilibrium, Open rule, Median voter theorem <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stewart textbook, Ch. 1, especially “The Politics of Lineland” 	
D1		RStudio Setup (DS) and Median Voter Theorem Review (CS)	
2.1	The Agenda Setter	Chaos Theorem, Negative agenda control, Veto points <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stewart, Ch. 1, especially “The Politics of Flatland” • Stewart, part of Ch. 8 “Committees in Congress” – The Setter Model 	

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2.2	Committees	<p>Closed rule, agenda-setting models, logrolling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stewart, part of Ch. 8 “Committees in Congress” – The Setter Model • Waxman, <i>How Congress Really Works</i>, Ch. 2 “California State Assembly to Congressional Subcommittee Chairman” (especially p.24 - 34 on Howard Smith and Paul Rogers) • Discuss: Jeff Flake and the Kavanaugh Judiciary Vote (C-SPAN, 12 min) • Stewart, Ch. 1 and 8
3.1	Committees and the Floor	<p style="text-align: right;">Assignment 1 (maps of states and districts)</p> <p>Floor rules, rollcall votes, and NOMINATE scores. Filibuster, unanimous consent, suspension of rules, and the information theory of committees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stewart, Ch. 9 “Doing it on the Floor”
3.2	Seniority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caro, <i>Master of the Senate</i>, Ch. 3 “Seniority and the South” (Content warning: a quote includes racial slur) • Bouie, Term-limits Op-ed
D3		Spatial Voting Review
4.1	Case: LBJ and the Southern Veto	<p>The New Deal Coalition, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement. Why did the parties realign? Why was LBJ powerful? Or was he powerful?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caro, <i>Master of the Senate</i>, Introduction “The Presence of Fire” (Content warning: a quote includes racial slur) • Schickler, <i>Racial Realignment</i>, Ch. 1 “Introduction” and Ch. 8 “Beyond the Roll Call.”
4.2	Review	Re-election, committees, seniority, rules committee, floor vote, regular order
D4		Week 4 Quiz in Section, in-person

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5.1 **Election** Why do members seem to be terrified of losing when they seem to get re-elected easily? What rules of the game would members of Congress make if interested in re-election?

- Mayhew, *Electoral Connection* (1974), First few pages of Part I “The Electoral Incentive” and more of Part II “Processes and Policies”
- Clinton biography, *First in His Class* (by David Maraniss) Ch. 13 “Law and Politics at Yale”, optional: Ch. 18 “Running with the Boy”
- “As Earmarks Return to Congress, Lawmakers Rush to Steer Money Home” *New York Times*, [April 2022](#)

5.2 **Political Ambition** How do ambitious politicians enter politics? What challenges do they face when they climb up the ladder?

- Pelosi biography, *Pelosi* (by Molly Ball). Ch. 1 – 4 (her parents, her childhood, and winning the 1976 special election)
- Merkel biography, *The Chancellor*, Ch. 2 and 4 (Leipzig University, 1989, and her entry into politics)
- Caro, *Master of the Senate*, Ch. 17 “The Nothing Job” and Ch. 24 “The Johnson Rule”
- (Optional) John Lewis memoir, *Walking with the Wind* Ch. 2 “A Small, Safe World,” and Ch. 19–20 (“The New South”, “Old Ghosts”.)

D5

6.1 **Polarization: Party Incentives** What is causing polarization in Congress? The 1980 and 1994 election. Messaging votes.

- Watch Lee [interview](#) (15 min), “Why presidential leadership can’t solve gridlock”
- Lee, *Insecure Majorities*, Ch.9 “The Perpetual Campaign and the US Constitutional System,” Ch. 3 “The Logic of Confrontation”
- PBS Frontline, [Pelosi’s Power](#), up to 29:00

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6.2	The End of Bipartisanship?	<p>Does the rise of messaging votes lead to the decline of actual lawmaking?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curry and Lee, <i>The Limits of Party</i>, Ch. 5 “Bipartisanship and the Decline of Regular Order”; Skim Ch. 2 “The Persistence of Bipartisan Lawmaking” Ch. 2 • Waxman, <i>How Congress Really Works</i>, Epilogue (2010 Climate Bill and ACA)
D6	Case: The Clean Air Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waxman, ch. 5 (the Clean Air Act)

Assignment 2 (roll call votes, voteview API)

7.1	Case: The Healthcare Industry	<p>What is the business model of insurance? Health providers? Adverse selection and moral hazard</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohn, <i>Ten Year War</i>, Chs. 1 – 7 (Roughly 1992 to 2008) • Reinhardt, <i>Priced Out</i>, Ch. 4 “Who Actually Pays for Health Care?” • Gawande, “The Cost Conundrum”, <i>New Yorker</i>, Feb. 2009
7.2	ACA Case: Pelosi	<p>Senate and House proposals, the filibuster pivot, the conference committee. Reid, Pelosi, Lieberman, Nelson, Snowe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohn, <i>Ten Year War</i>, Ch. 8 – 17, especially Ch. 14 “Death Panels,” Ch. 15 “Madam Speaker,” Ch. 16 “March or Die”, Ch. 17 “A Big F****ing Deal” • Recommended documentary: PBS Frontline, Pelosi’s Power (up to ACA part at 50:00)
8.1	ACA Case: Senate reconciliation	<p>Republican reactions to the ACA, 2010-2021.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohn, <i>TTYW</i>, Cohn, <i>Ten Year War</i>, Ch. 8-17, especially Ch.15 ”Madam Speaker”
8.2	Midterm paper discussion	

Midterm Paper – all students (ACA analysis)

SPRING BREAK

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9.1	Relationship with the Judiciary	Statutory vs. constitutional rulings, statutory interpretation, <i>NFIB v. Sebelius</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohn, <i>TTYW</i>, Ch. 19 “This Honorable Court” and Ch. 20 • Liptak, “Gridlock in Congress Has Amplified the Power of the Supreme Court”, <i>New York Times</i>, July 2022
9.2	Relationship with the Executive	

10.1	Money and Lobbying: Rules	The FEC, <i>Buckley</i> , hard vs. money, PACs, <i>Citizens United</i> , correlation vs. causation, the dollar value of policy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stewart textbook, chapter 6 • Adler, Jenkins, and Shipan textbook, <i>The United States Congress</i>, 2nd ed. Ch. 12 “Congress and Interest Groups” • Hacker and Pierson, <i>How the Right Rules</i>, selected chapters
10.2	Money and Politics: Discussion	The Lobbying Disclosure Act, Opensecrets.org, Ethics Rules, Foreign Lobbying <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hall and Deardorff, “Lobbying as a Legislative Subsidy,” <i>American Political Science Review</i> (2006) • Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder, “Why is there so little Money in American Politics”, <i>Journal of Economic Perspectives</i> (2003) • Michael Franz, “Cost of Campaigns, 1888-2018” (2019) • Optional: Waxman, <i>How Congress Really Works</i>, Ch. 9 “The Tobacco Wars”

D10	Discuss <i>Why is there so Little Money</i> , Assignment 3 (Cost of FECs post <i>Citizens United</i>)	
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11.1	Districting Rules, Partisan Gerrymandering	<p>Equal population, contiguity, communities of interest, single member districts, Urban and rural divides, unintentional gerrymandering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stewart textbook, Ch. 6 “Regulating Elections” part 1 • Rodden, <i>Why Cities Lose</i>, Ch. 1 and Ch. 6 “Political Geography and the Representation of Democrats”
11.2	Racial Gerrymandering: The Future of the VRA	<p>VRA Section 2, Opportunity to elect, racially polarized voting, <i>Shaw v. Reno</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCOTUSblog, <i>Merill v. Milligan</i> explainer • Pildes, “Is Voting Rights Law now at War with itself”, <i>North Carolina Law Review</i> (2002), only first and last parts
12.1	In-class exam (50 min)	Tests knowledge of key rules in Congress, historical facts and figures, and spatial voting theory.
12.2	The New Realignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kitschelt and Rhem, “Secular Partisan Realignment in the United States: The Socioeconomic Reconfiguration of White Partisan Support since the New Deal Era” • Hunt (2020) data on college degrees of Members of Congress
13.1	Representation	<p>What are the costs of descriptive representation? What is the normative defense of it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki, “Collective Representation in Congress” and “Congressional Accountability in Congress: The Constituent’s Perspective” • Mansbridge, “Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Conditional Yes”, <i>Journal of Politics</i> (1999)
13.2	The Efficient Secret	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rosenbluth and Shapiro, Ch. 4 -5, “Big Strong Parties: Westminster”, “Big Weak Parties: The American Variety” • Mansbridge, “What is Political Science For?” (2014)

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Assignment 4 (Alabama map and realignment trends)

Final Paper

Due electronically at the end of reading period.
