

How Congress Really Works: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
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Session Dates: September 30, October 7, October 21, October 28, November 4. The sessions will take place from 1:00-2:30 p.m. in the McKinney Conference room (353) at 111 Thayer St.

Overview: We live in a time of bitter partisan divide in our government and across the country. Public opinion of Congress is at an all-time low. While voters may like their individual Representatives, they view Congress as corrupt and ineffective. There is good reason to be skeptical about Congress. This view from the inside may help generate ideas about how Congress can become more effective and improve its standing in the eyes of American voters.

This seminar will be taught by a former member of Congress who started her first term during the height of COVID, was caught in the House gallery during the January 6th insurrection, and had to figure out how to get things done for her constituents during highly partisan times. The focus will be on the practical aspects of what it is like to run for the House of Representatives and how to transition from a candidate to an effective member of Congress. We'll talk about what it's like to set up a well-functioning office, fight to get on committees, handle input from constituents and other stakeholders, introduce legislation, communicate positions effectively, and work with members on both sides of the aisle. We will discuss how difficult it is to get legislation passed, what happens when Congress gives its authority to other branches of government, and whether Congress can get more done in today's highly charged partisan environment.

Students will choose one member of the House, preferably in a "frontline" or at-risk seat, and track their bills, speeches, letters, and social media accounts to evaluate the member's effectiveness and understand how the member's political situation impacts their positions and messaging. Students can expect at least half of each session to be discussion on the topics presented, suggested readings, and ideas for how Congress can be more effective and regain public trust.

Session One: Running for Office - Do we get the Representatives we really want and deserve?

In this session we will discuss what it takes to run for office – how candidates decide to run, build a successful campaign team, raise money and galvanize supporters. We will touch on the importance of getting help from the party, elected officials, ideological and other PACS, and what it takes to win in the primary and in the general election. Topics for discussion will include gerrymandering – particularly how gerrymandering pre-determines election outcomes, exacerbates extremism, and what options there are for addressing this issue - as well as campaign finance reform, and voter protection/suppression. We will also discuss how these three issues impact voter participation and the public's view of the confidence in Congress.

Session Two: So you won your race – now what? Getting started and getting things done.

After winning a campaign, the newly elected Representative has to hire staff, set up the DC and District office(s), decide which committees seats are available and desirable, strategize how to get on those committees, decide whether to join a caucus, run for class leadership positions, select the best available office location, learn their way around the Capitol and get the right office location, and decide how to focus their time and effort.

Members who want to make their mark can choose different paths. They can cosponsor other member's legislation, draft or sign on letters and resolutions, and introduce new legislation, which requires getting support from other members and outside stakeholders. Some members choose to work their way up the leadership ladder, position themselves to become the chair of a committee or a caucus, or work to build coalitions on important issues. We will walk through one piece of legislation, from the identification of a problem, to drafting a bill to address that problem, to getting the bill to the House floor for a vote.

We will discuss hurdles to getting legislation passed, from structural impediments set up by leadership and complex committee structures, to opposition by more senior members, the opposing party, the administration, or outside interest groups. We will also discuss the important role of staff in helping members succeed in all of the above efforts. One issue for discussion is whether the often maddeningly slow, complicated, and time-consuming effort necessary to get legislation passed is a design flaw or an intentional part of the Congressional process.

Session Three: Representing Your Constituents

The House of Representatives, defined in Article 1 of the Constitution, was designed to be the closest and the most accountable branch of government to the people they represent. Article 1 gives Congress “all legislative power” generally, with enormous powers over taxes, duties, other financial matters, commerce, defense, foreign affairs, treaties, immigration, and the declaration of war. Members of the House have “performance reviews” every two years through elections. Whether Congress is actually exercising all of these powers or has delegated much of this power to the Executive Branch or has unintentionally given power to the Courts by failing to act, will be discussed in our last session.

This session will focus on what it takes to be a good representative for your constituents. Topics for discussion will include the importance of meeting with constituents, special interest groups, and lobbyists, communicating with constituents, responding to letters, emails and phone calls, handling “case work” properly, and the role of “earmarks” or community projects. We will discuss the challenge of sharing accurate information in today’s world of expanding media outlets, the lack of media accountability, and how the bitter partisan divide makes open discussion and compromise more difficult. We will also consider whether there is a need to expand the number of seats in the House of Representatives; Article 1 Section 2 of the Constitution said there should be one representative for every 30,000 people, but Congressional districts today include approximately 750,000 people.

Session 4: Getting Your Message Out

How do member of Congress express their priorities, ask other law makers and stakeholders to make changes or address problems, or speak out on issues they believe are important? We will examine how members use questioning during hearings, press conferences, floor speeches, press statements, letters to the president, cabinet members, international bodies, other world leaders, social media, or other means to get messages out to the public. We will talk about time limits imposed, the importance of precision, and important role of staff to helping members use these various tools. The same qualities that make legislators effective – being concise, precise, and persuasive – can be used by constituents and lobbyists to impact members’ decisions and be respectful of their time. Students will be asked to present a “one minute” speech on a topic of their choosing. They will also be given the opportunity to give examples of how the members they have chosen to track are getting their messages out.

We will also address the challenges of meeting with constituents in town halls, roundtables, and community visits when bitter partisanship, incivility, and even death threats raise security issues and make public gatherings more difficult. Once again, we will consider the

use of alternative means of communications, whether the unregulated ‘Wild West’ of social media has a negative impact on interactions with members of Congress, and the potential effect of AI and deep fakes on the ability of Congress to communicate with the public. Student proposals for dealing with social media and AI will be welcomed.

Session 5: Making Change through Congressional Legislation: What could possibly go wrong?

So, you’ve worked hard with your colleagues and gotten big and important legislation passed – legislation that requires agency regulations, the expenditure of federal funding over time, work with states, local authorities, and the business sector, and a significant amount of time, effort and investment to implement – like the Infrastructure Law, the Chips and Science Act, or the Inflation Reduction Act. What happens when the next administration or the next Congress decides to undo that legislation, or claws back the funding that was allocated? What can and should the next President accomplish with Executive Orders, bypassing Congress? What happens when Congress has given away its authority, piece by piece, through legislation, as with Tariff authority or open-ended and broad authorization of the use of Military Force (AUMFs)? And what happens when Congress has failed to act, and the Supreme Court steps in and rescinds long-established rights (the Dobbs decision) or refuses to address conflicts between the states that affect federal elections (gerrymandering)?

In this final session, we will discuss whether the balance of power with three co-equal branches of government is working as intended by our founders or has gotten out of balance in a way that poses a threat to the functioning of and trust in our government. Students will be encouraged to propose changes, if considered necessary, to rebalance and rebuild trust in our government.