General Synopsis:

This course is an introduction to the theoretical and empirical literature on Congressional organization and development. Our general approach will have a distinct rational-choice flavor, as we will assume that the preferences and goals of individual members of Congress (MCs) shape how Congress is organized and how the institution has developed over time. The first half of the course will focus on legislative organization, as we examine three different perspectives – the distributive, informational, and partisan – that have sought to explain the structure and process of Congress. The second half of the course will focus on legislative development, as we examine why certain structures and processes in Congress have been chosen (or not chosen) at various points in time.

Course Requirements:

There are a number of requirements for this class:

(1) You must come to class prepared, which means that you have done the week’s readings in advance. You are also expected to participate in class discussion. Participation is what makes a seminar a useful learning experience – you learn as much from the in-class discussion as you do from the readings themselves. Moreover, given that this is your chosen vocation, you should be active in fostering your professional development.

(2) Each week, each student will serve as a “discussion leader” for a given paper (or a section of a book). This means that you will present the paper (book section) in class – covering the theory, substance, and empirics in a thorough and critical manner.

(3) A “final assignment” will be due at the end of the quarter. This assignment can take two forms. First, if you so desire, you may write a research paper (or detailed research design). This option may allow you to make strides toward the completion of a piece that may eventually be publishable. Second, you may opt for a take-home final exam. This option may be more attractive to you, should you not want to pursue research in the Congress field.
Course Grades:

Participation and Quality of Discussion Leadership will make up 50% of the grade, while the final assignment (exam) will also be worth 50%.

If you do the readings and participate in a thoughtful way in class, you will do fine. The most important thing is that you endeavor to learn – do not be afraid to make mistakes. If you show me that you are a serious student, you will be rewarded.

A number of books are required. All are available at the UVA Bookstore:


We will also read portions of the following book. It is recommended for purchase, but I will place the relevant chapters on reserve in the Scripps Library.


Finally, in the event that you need a “nuts and bolts” overview of the institutions of Congress, you might purchase the following book:

Other Issues:

I will assume that you have taken an undergraduate Congress course and thus have a working knowledge of the institution. If you feel that you are not quite up to speed, the books by Oleszek and Stewart are solid primers. In particular, chapters 7-9 of the Stewart book will provide a nice substantive overview as we move through the various theories of legislative organization. When a particular issue/concept is especially important to understand a given reading – for example, the discharge rule in the House – we will spend a bit of time discussing its substance.

In addition to the books above, I will assign a number of articles from scholarly journals and chapters from edited volumes. Many are available electronically (the source of which I indicate next to the citation), but some are not. In those cases, I will provide PDF versions via email.

**Week 1: Introduction – General Overview and Discussion of the Syllabus**

**Week 2: Theoretical Direction – Rational Choice and the Study of Congress**


**Week 3: Positive Theories of Legislative Organization: Distributive and Informational Approaches**


**Week 4: Positive Theories of Legislative Organization: Partisan Approaches**


Week 5: Legislative Organization – Where’s the Party?


Week 6: Legislative Organization – Here’s the Party!


— make sure to read the Appendix in Setting the Agenda, which deals directly with an early working paper of Krehbiel’s (2007) article.

Week 7: Legislative Organization and Parties – Current Last Word


Week 8: Spring Break
**Week 9: Legislative Institutions – Origins and Development**


— Also, read the section in the following article that deals directly with Gamm/Shepsle: Humes, Brian D. 1989. “Congress at the Bicentennial: A Comment.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 14: 135-45. (JSTOR)


**Week 10: Minority Rights and Procedural Change, Part I**


**Week 11: Minority Rights and Procedural Change, Part II**


**Week 12:**

NO CLASS
**Week 13: Examining Institutional Change**


**Week 14: A Focus on the Senate**


**Week 15: Polarization in Congress**
