

U.S. Legislative Politics Syllabus
Political Science 3130
Spring 2017

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Course Description

U.S. Legislative Politics is an advanced course that explores how and why Congress legislates as it does. The chief goal of the course is not, as one might expect, to provide students with a comprehensive perspective on the formal intricacies of the legislative process. Instead, the course emphasizes politics within the legislative process, and the broad relationship between institutional rules, reelection incentives, representation, and policy outcomes.

About one-fourth of the course will be conventionally organized, with about 8-10 class days devoted to lectures and discussion. Topics will include legislative deadlock and pork barreling within Congress, congressional elections, congressional political parties, and the lawmaking process.

The remaining three-fourths of the course will consist of a congressional simulation called Simcong. We will begin organizing Simcong during first three weeks of class, and will entirely commit the last ten weeks of the course to it. Each student in Simcong serves as a U.S. Senator. At the beginning of the semester, each student will research his or her assigned state, and then construct a personal, senatorial website explaining which political issues are important to the state.

There will be no “majority” party in Simcong. The Republican will choose the Speaker, and there will be equal (or nearly equal) numbers of Republican and Democratic senators. Bills likely to be considered over the next two years in the U.S. Congress will comprise most of the Simcong legislative agenda. There will be four committees in Simcong: Commerce, International Relations and Finance, Judiciary, and Human Resources. Each senator will serve on one committee.

The Republican senators will elect a Speaker, Party Leader, a Party Whip, two Committee Chairs, and “Ranking Minority Members” (RMM) for two committees. The Speaker will act as the presiding officer in the general, “plenary” sessions of the Senate. The Republican Party Leader will preside over party caucuses, have other powers, and have some unique academic responsibilities. The Democratic senators will elect a Party Leader, a Party Whip, two Committee Chairs, and “Ranking Minority Members” (RMM) for two committees. The Democratic Party Leader will preside over party caucuses, have other powers, and have some unique academic responsibilities. Committee Chairs will have broad powers to control their committees as they wish.

Once Simcong is organized, the committees will meet to consider legislation. The committees will first conduct a hearing on each bill, then debate the bill and offer amendments. With these deliberations complete, they will vote to approve or disapprove of the bill as amended. If a committee does approve a bill, then the bill moves forward for consideration in a plenary session of the whole. In plenary sessions of the whole, all of the senators will have an opportunity to debate, to offer amendments, and to vote on legislation, repeating the process of deliberation that occurred in committee, but without any hearings.

Altogether, Simcong will consider about 60 bills. Twenty of these bills will involve issues of national significance that I will select together with the class. In addition to these bills, each senator¹ will introduce one bill of their own choosing--either involving a national issue, or something of concern in his or her state. Senators will receive bonus points if their bill passes in sessions in a session of the whole.

Nationally significant legislation that the class will consider may include:

Approval of the Trans Pacific Trade Partnership
Limits on the President's Power to Unilaterally Establish Tariffs
The Republican U.S. House Tax Cut
A Republican-Designed Revision of the Affordable Care Act
A Public Education Reform Proposal Based on the Finnish Educational System
An Increase in the Social Security Retirement Age
A Repeal of the National Drinking Age of 21
A Bill Eliminating the Penny from U.S. Currency
The Mandatory Labeling of Foods containing GMOs
A Bill Requiring Employers to Offer Employees Vacation and Sick Leave
A Sugar-Sweetened Beverages Tax
A Plan to Allow Workers to Divert Part of Their Social Security Taxes into Alternate Investments
The Repeal of the War on Drugs
Puerto Rico Statehood
An Increase in the Minimum Wage
A Modification of Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments
A Bill Recognizing Jerusalem as the Capital of Israel.
A Bill Limiting U.S. Military Support for Nations That Do Not Meet their NATO Financial Obligations
A Bill Funding a U.S. Human Landing on Mars
Defunding Planned Parenthood

Course Learning Objectives

1. To provide students with an overview of how Congress represents voters and how it writes laws.
2. To help students understand the relationship between institutional rules, political incentives and legislative outcomes in Congress.
3. To give students firsthand experience with political interest advocacy and political decision making.
4. To encourage students to think in depth both philosophically and politically about important policy issues.
5. To develop verbal and analytical skills in students, and to prepare them for careers in which they will be required to think logically and to write intelligibly--in business, journalism, education, medicine, science, technology, and engineering--as well as in government and law.
6. To familiarize students with the fundamentals of web site construction.

Course Prerequisites

The prerequisites for Political Science 3130 include intellectual curiosity, an interest in U.S. public policy and how the U.S. Congress shapes it, patience, a sense of humor, a "B" grade or better in introductory U.S. government, the ability to conduct political research and to write a quality research paper, and a commitment to attend class 95-100% of the time and to put serious effort into the course. A personality that includes openness to other viewpoints, the willingness to listen to others, intellectual independence, a

¹The Speaker, the Party Leaders, and the Committee Chairs are exempt from this requirement.

competitive streak, and the disposition to take a “game” seriously can also contribute to success in the course. By no means is the course suitable only for political science majors.

Contacting the Professor

My contact information is at the top of the syllabus. I always prefer to meet students in my office rather than to use other forms of communication. Resort to email if you must in an emergency, or if you have a very simple question, but never for questions that require complex answers. Keep in mind that I am usually available TT after noon, and on MWF until I leave (normally around 7:00), even though I do not have office hours at those times. I beg you please not to ask questions when I arrive in the classroom just before class on a lecture day, as I need to focus on putting an outline on the board and getting the computer set up in those precious few minutes. Generally speaking, I like to have students raise questions about lecture material in class, but to bring other types of questions to my office.

Course Web Sites

I will record course grades on Canvas. We will use a Google Website for most other course purposes. The URL is: <https://sites.google.com/site/usupoliticalscience3130/>

Administrative Assistants

Jade Burt and Brenda Horrocks will serve as the course Administrative Assistants. They will help students with the organization of the Simcong political parties and the construction of their senatorial websites, oversee Simcong committee meetings, manage the course website, and organize electronic paperwork generated in the course.

Exam

The course has a multiple choice exam scheduled on Feb. 17. The exam covers course lectures, and it will emphasize conceptual analysis and logic, not the memorization of facts. It will be worth 30 points and account for 15% of each grade.

Under no circumstances will a student be given an “early” exam. Students who miss the exam as the result of required participation in a university activity, the death of an immediate family member, or a documented, serious medical problem will be given an essay make up exam. Students who miss an exam for other reason (lack of preparation, weddings of friends, drug possession arrests, Hawaiian vacations) will fail the exam. If a student misses an exam and does not contact me within 48 hours, I will presume there is no justification for a make up exam.

Papers

Policy Issue Research Paper. In this research paper, each senator will analyze one of the nationally significant bills that the entire class will consider in the simulation. The target length for this paper will be 1500 words, and it will be due on March 1. This paper will account for 25% of each course grade—with 50 points possible. The purpose of the research papers assignment is to generate expertise on each one of nationally significant bills that Simcong will consider. As a general rule, there will be at least two Senate members writing on each one of 20 nationally significant issues that Simcong will consider, at least one as an advocate, and at least one other as an opponent. Once the papers are written, each student will testify on the bill that they have written about in the Senate committee that has jurisdiction over the bill. They will also answer questions.

“Dear Colleague” Letter.² Each senator’s “Dear Colleague” letter will explain the bill that the senator has written. Senators who succeed in getting their bills enacted into laws will receive bonus points, with the number of bonus points being contingent on the quality of the bill and the accompanying “Dear Colleague” letter. The “Dear Colleague” letter will have a target length of 250-500 words, and will be worth 20 points, 10% of each course grade. It will be due on March 22.

“Confidential Note to the Instructor.” In this assignment, each student will select the most effective participants in the simulation, comment on the performance of other students, and to vent any frustrations that they may have. The target length for this assignment will be 250 words, but each student will have the freedom to write as much as he or she wishes. It will be due during finals week, and it will account 5% of each course grade—10 points. Students who offer particularly perceptive insights on this paper will receive bonus points.

Note. I accept hard copies only on all paper assignments. That is one reason they are called “papers.” I do not accept electronic submissions.

Late Papers Policy

With the exception of truly extraordinary circumstances, papers will be accepted no more than one class day late, with a penalty equivalent to ½ letter grade for all late papers. The instructor advises students never to depend upon a computer printer during the last two hours before a paper is due.

Plagiarization and Original Content in the Course Paper

Plagiarization is the use of material from sources without attribution or citation of the source. Passages lifted verbatim from non cited sources obviously qualify as plagiarism, but so too does the superficial rewording and or casual rearrangement of such passages. Students who submit papers that arouse suspicion will be subjected to “enhanced” CIA interrogation methods supervised by former Vice President Dick Cheney. Significant and apparently deliberate plagiarization on any course paper will normally result in a failing grade in the course and dismissal from the class.

In addition to citing sources properly, your papers in P.S. 3130 should be substantially original in content. Naturally, you will base your papers largely on facts and ideas collected from sources. But the sources should be diverse, and the synthesis of facts and ideas, as well as the prose, should be your own work. As a rough general standard, no more than about 15-20% of a paper should be based on one source, and no more than about 10% of the words in your paper should directly quote or paraphrase sources. If we find a paper not to be substantially original, the result will be a failing paper grade.

Simcong Requirements

Simcong participation will account for 45% of each course grade—10% for attendance, 15% for effectiveness in legislative deliberations,³ and 20% for each student’s senatorial website. The attendance grading standards appear below, with absences on lecture days not being applicable, but with tardiness on a simulation day being counted as a partial absence.

Absences
0

Attendance Points
20

² The Speaker, the Party Leaders, and the Committee Chairs are exempt from this requirement.

³ This does not apply to the Speaker, the Party Leaders or the Committee Chairs. Twenty-five percent of their course grade will depend on the effectiveness of their participation.

1	19
2	16
3	12
4	8
5	4
6 or more	0

Students who attend class faithfully, are alert and courteous, mindful of their state’s interests, and consistently *engaged* in Simcong can expect to receive 25 to 30 points for “legislative effectiveness.” Students who fail to represent their states, who are immature or disruptive, or who remain passive in Simcong can expect to receive 20 points or fewer.

Simcong Participation Grade Insurance

Students who attend class faithfully and who consistently remain *engaged* in the in Simcong, will never receive a Simcong participation grade lower than their average grade on the exam and the first two papers.

Senatorial Websites

Early in the semester, each student will construct as a personal “senatorial” website, similar in many respects to real U.S. congressional websites. These websites serve two main purposes in Simcong. First, they are designed to prepare you to represent your state by forcing you to think about the policy issue positions that the voters in your state will support. Second, they will enable class members to get to know each other, facilitating networking and coalition building in the course.

You will need to have the following items on your site: a personal photograph, some personal biographical information, your E-mail address, your ADA rating, some basic demographic and economic data for your state, at least two visual images that convey something about the economy or the culture of your state, the 2016 presidential election returns for your state or state, an explanation of 3-4 political issues that are most important to your state or state, and your positions on 3-4 nationally important issues selected by the instructor. Determining which issues are important to your state or state and formulating your issue positions will be the most difficult parts of this assignment, and the most important in terms of our grading.

You are free to put anything else you want on your website—issue positions, philosophical statements, photos or videos, links, rants, and pretty much anything else within reason. Each Senatorial website will be worth 40 points, accounting for 20% of each course. Students will need to complete their websites by February 7. I will reward creative and politically effective innovation in the grading of the websites.

Suspect Recorded Votes

Each Party Leader, Committee Chair, and Ranking Minority Committee Member will have the power to draw the instructor’s attention to any “Suspect Recorded Vote” cast by any Senator, in committee or in a Session of the Whole. Recorded votes are potentially suspect when they appear to be contrary to the policy preferences of a state, or when cast in favor of a preposterous policy position. (This can include “Present” votes in situations where either a “Yes” or a “No” vote was politically imperative.) Class members who cast “Suspect Recorded Votes” will have the opportunity confidentially to explain the vote to the instructor. In situations where the Instructor is not satisfied with a Senator’s explanation for a vote, a Senator may be penalized a point or two in course grading.

Bonus Points

Senators who succeed in getting the bills they have written passed into law will receive bonus points. I will also award bonus points for creative use of personal web sites and for exceptionally perceptive “Confidential Notes to the Instructor” at the end of the semester. Occasionally, I reward particularly effective or ingenious simulation participation with bonus points.

Grading Standards

In Political Science 3130, each student’s final grade reflects the instructors’ evaluation of the student’s performance in the course, nothing more, nothing less. Beyond “bonus points” awarded to students in certain situations explained in the syllabus, there will be no extra credit. Students who put “genuine effort” into the course can normally expect to receive course grades of “A” or “B.” Students demonstrate “genuine effort” by at least 90% of the time attending class, paying attention, taking complete notes during lectures, effectively presenting research and analysis in the policy issue paper, putting together a complete and reasonably thoughtful web page, and participating actively in the simulation.

Some students find the grading standards in P.S. 3130 to be quite rigorous, and you should adjust your expectations accordingly. Students should not conclude that college instructors establish their grading standards to make students feel inferior, or to intimidate them. We simply want you to learn about government and to prepare you for careers in which you will be required to think logically and to write intelligibly. Rest assured, the “grading standards” that most of you will encounter in your postgraduate careers will be far more rigorous than the grading standards in Political Science 3130.

P.S. 3130 Course Grade Components: A Summary⁴

	Possible Points	Percentage of Course Grade
Multiple Choice Exam on Lectures	30	15%
Policy Issue Research Paper	50	25%
“Dear Colleague” Letter	20	10%
Confidential Note to the Instructor	10	5%
Simcong Attendance	20	10%
Simcong Legislative Effectiveness	30	15%
Senatorial Websites	40	20%

Grade Computations

Certain patterns of academic performance occasionally cause me to award a grade higher than the table below indicates. In no case will a student in any point range receive a grade *lower* than the grade indicated in the table.

Total Points	Final Grade No Lower Than
181-200+	A
178-180	A-
175-177	B+
161-174	B
158-160	B-

⁴ This does not apply to the Speaker, the Party Leaders or the Committee Chairs. Twenty-five percent of their course grade will depend on the effectiveness of their participation, and they are not required to write a bill or a “Dear Colleague” letter.

155-157	C+
141-154	C
135-140	C-
120-134	D

Students who receive fewer than 120 points normally will fail the course.

Classroom Civility

Regrettably, a small minority of USU students demonstrate insensitivity to other students and to instructors by disrupting classes unnecessarily. Such disruptions commonly result from talking to friends in class, bringing young children to class, reading newspapers in class, packing notebooks and other materials prior to the end of lecture, and late arrivals to class. Disruptions of these types will not be tolerated in P.S. 3130. Students who violate this policy will receive one firm warning, and will be dismissed from class permanently if they cause any further problem.

Disabled Students

Students with disabilities likely require accommodation by the instructor must contact the instructor and document the disability through the Disability Resource Center during the first week of classes. Requests for special considerations relating to attendance, pedagogy, or exams, etc. must be approved by the instructor.

Tentative Course Outline

Week	Lecture Topics and Simcong Activities. Lecture topics marked with a “*”
Jan. 9-13	*The Broken Branch ADA Ratings Calculated, Jan. 13
Jan. 18-20	*The Broken Branch Continued State Assignment Forms Distributed, Jan. 18 State Assignment Forms Due Jan. 20
Jan. 23-27	*Congressional Districts State Assignments Complete, Jan. 23 Senatorial Website Instructions Distributed, and Wordpress Website Tutorial, Jan. 25
Jan. 30- Feb. 3	*Congressional Elections and Congressional Political Parties
Feb. 6-10	Senatorial Website Completion Date: Feb. 8 *Congressional Rules, The Legislative Process, Pork Barreling “Get Acquainted,” Party Caucuses and Mandatory Attendance Begins, Feb. 10
Feb. 13-17	Policy Issue Research Paper Explanation Distributed, Feb. 15 Midterm Exam, Feb. 15 Party Caucuses, Parties Assign Policy Issue Topics to Senators, Feb. 17
Feb. 21-24	Political Party Rules, Party Caucuses

*Congressional Reform, "Fair Tax" Example Testimony
The Election of Party Leaders, the Speaker, and Committee Chairs, on or before Feb. 24

Following university policy, MWF classes, including P.S. 3130, will meet on Tuesday, February 21.

Feb 27- Committee Assignments Due Feb. 27, Committee Rules, Feb 27
March 3 Policy Issue Research Paper Due, "Get Acquainted," Committee Meetings, March 1
 The Committees Hear Testimony and Consider Bills, March 3

March 13-17 The Committees Hear Testimony and Consider Bills

March 20-24 The Committees Hear Testimony and Consider Bills
 "Dear Colleague" Letter Due March 22

March 27-31 The Committees Hear Testimony and Consider Bills

April 3-7 The Committees Hear Testimony and Consider Bills and/or Sessions of the Whole

April 10-14 Sessions of the Whole

April 17-19 Sessions of the Whole

On April 21 and 24 Class is Cancelled, and a Special "Make Up" Session Will Be Held on April 17, 18, or 27.

April 26-28 Sessions of the Whole

