

U.S. Legislative Politics
Political Science 3130
Spring 2021

Dr. Michael Lyons
michael.lyons@usu.edu
435-797-1312

Office: Main 330D
Office Hours: see “Contacting the
Professor” on the next syllabus page

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. Rules and procedures do matter in the course; but the course also demonstrates that legislative politics is most essentially a social activity involving the formulation of strategy, bargaining, compromise, and coalition building, all animated by ideology and by responsibilities to diverse geographical constituencies.

About one-fourth of the course will be conventionally organized, with about 8-10 class days devoted to lectures and discussion. Topics will include political party ideologies, legislative deadlock 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.

Following a class tradition, as the Majority party in both chambers of the U.S. Congress, the Democrats will be the “Majority Party” in Simcong—but there will be 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 three committees in Simcong: Commerce; International Relations, Finance, and Judiciary; and Human Resources. Each senator will serve on one committee. The presiding office in Sessions of the entire class will be the Speaker selected by the Democratic party.

The Republican senators will elect a Party Leader, a Party Whip, one Committee Chair, and “Ranking Minority Members” (RMM) for two committees. In addition to the Speaker, the Democratic senators will elect counterparts to these Republican leaders. Each 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. RMMs will have subtle but important powers.

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 (this sometimes results in bills being completely deconstructed.) With these deliberations complete, the committee will vote to approve or disapprove of the bill as amended. If a committee does approve

a bill, then the bill moves on to consideration in a plenary session of the whole. In these sessions, all of the senators will have the opportunity to debate, to offer amendments, and to vote on legislation, repeating the process of deliberation that occurred in committee, but without hearings.

Altogether, Simcong will consider about 45 bills. Fifteen of these bills will involve issues of national significance that I will select together with the class. Nationally significant legislation that the class will consider may include:

Suspending Funding for The Wall
Universal Basic Income
A Wealth Tax
A Roll Back of School Lunch Nutrition Standards
A Repeal of The 2017 Tax Cut
Medicare for All Who Want It
A Public Education Reform Proposal Based on the Finnish Educational System
A Carbon Tax
A “Doughnut Hole” Social Security Tax to Restore the Financial Solvency of the System
A Massive Infrastructure Program
Climate Change Legislation
An Increase in the Social Security Retirement Age to Restore the Financial Solvency of the System
National Marijuana Legalization
An Assault Weapons Ban
A Bill Mandating Ranked Choice Voting in Presidential Primary Elections
Repeal of the Electoral College Winner Take All Rule.
A Bill Eliminating the Penny from U.S. Currency
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
Puerto Rico Statehood
Washington D.C. Statehood
A Bill Authorizing the Division of California into Three States
Increase in the Minimum Wage
A Bill Funding a U.S. Human Landing on Mars

In addition to these bills, each senator¹ will introduce one bill of their own choosing. Senators will receive bonus points if their bill passes in sessions in a session of the whole.

Course Learning Objectives

1. To provide students with an overview of how Congress represents voters and how it writes laws.
2. To illuminate the relationships between institutional rules, political incentives and legislative outcomes in Congress.
3. To help students to see the importance of political strategy, coalition building, social intelligence, and social cooperation in the legislative process, and to help them to acquire the skills they will need to work with others as part of a team.

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

4. To give students first hand experience with political interest advocacy, political decision making, and political conflict resolution
5. To encourage students to think in depth both philosophically and politically about important policy issues.
6. 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.

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 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. Three years ago, the most effective Republican in the class in my view was an engineering major who understood Republican free market ideology thoroughly, and who tried his best to provide the Republicans with a moral compass on economic issues.

Contacting the Professor

Last semester I found that the best way to make myself available to students with questions or other concerns was to stay on Zoom for 10-15 minutes at the end of each class period. So I will do that again this semester. Otherwise, I strongly prefer to talk to students personally though Zoom--rather than using email.

But I will not try to conduct traditional office hours through Zoom. This proved to be a waste of time last semester. Instead, I will meet students over Zoom through individual appointments. As a general rule, I will be available for Zoom appointments any time between 1:30 and 6:00 pm, TTF, and also between 4:30-6:00 pm MW. To set up an appointment, simply send me an email specifying me when you would like to meet. I will then confirm the meeting time, and send you a Zoom link at that time. (You can also set up an appointment by calling me in my office, as normally, I work in my office.) Resort to email to ask questions or raise concerns if you absolutely must in an emergency, but never use email for questions that require complex answers. .

Teaching Assistants

We are fortunate to have two outstanding students from 2020 return too the class to act as Teaching Assistants, and consultants to the political parties.

Josh Allen. Republican Consultant
Liz Cook. Democratic Consultant

jjallen514@gmail.com
liz_cook@live.com

Spring Semester 2021 Special Circumstances

P.S. 3130 is an unusual course and we may encounter serious challenges as we try for the time to adapt to an on line format. Unquestionably, we will not be able to replicate fully the vitality or immediacy of a face to face class—but we want to try our best. We ask you to help us. We need you to become fearless, engaged participants in Zoom group discussions. Most of the course will consist of such discussions mostly in your party or committee. Please, please do not be passive observers in these meetings. Speak up if only to ask questions. In particular, we implore those of you with an introverted disposition to jump in. Contribute regularly. You will learn more than way and so will everyone else. Your classmates need you.

I have already altered some of the course content and course requirements to accommodate the Zoom delivery process. Normally, course assignments, policies, and grading procedures are in stone once the semester is underway, but not in this course this semester. Instead, I reserve the right to adjust the course content, requirements, policies, or grading procedures as the course progresses. I will work closely with our two undergraduate Teaching Assistants in this regard, and will also try to be responsive to your suggestions. Help us.

I want the course to remain rigorous, but I do not want it to become overwhelming. Any changes that we do make will not add to your course workload or the overall difficulty of the course. I ask for your patience as we all contend with this new environment. Please try to keep in mind that I am a Political Scientist, not an IT consultant, and I lack the expertise to help you with wifi failures or other technology problems on your computer.

Exam

The course has a multiple choice exam scheduled February 12 or 17. The exam covers course lectures, and it will emphasize conceptual analysis and logic, not the memorization of facts. It will be worth 20 points and account for 10% 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 serious medical problem will be given an essay make up exam. Students who miss an exam for other reasons (lack of preparation, weddings of friends, drug possession arrests, Hawaiian vacations) will fail the exam.

Papers

Policy Issue Research Paper. In this research paper, each senator will analyze of one of the nationally significant bills that the entire class will consider in the simulation. The target length for this paper will be 1250 words, and it will be due on March 12. This paper will account for 30% of each course grade—with 50 points possible. The purpose of the research paper 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 15 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.

Personal Bill.² Each senator will personally sponsor a bill—normally a real congressional bill that you will “adopt.” Senators who succeed in getting their bills enacted into laws will receive bonus points, with the number being contingent on the quality of the bill. Each senator will submit a 250-500 word explanation of specifically what their bill will accomplish and how it will be beneficial, accounting for 20 points, or 10% of each course grade. It will be due on March 24 or 26.

“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 On April 29, and it will account 5% of each course grade—10 points. Students who offer particularly perceptive insights on this paper will receive bonus points.

Late Papers Policy

With the exception of truly extraordinary circumstances, papers will be accepted no more than one class day late, with a penalty 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. Significant plagiarism on the Policy Issue Research 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. You need use a wide range of sources, and 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 I find a paper not to be substantially original, the result will be a failing paper grade.

Simcong Requirements

Attendance. Simcong participation will account for 25% of each course grade—10% for attendance, 15% for effectiveness in legislative deliberations.³ 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	Attendance Points
0	20
1	19

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.

2	16
3	12
4	8
5 or more	0

Simcong Legislative Effectiveness. 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 their written assignments, induing their website.

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 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. In addition to analysis of your state, your website must contain a personal photograph, biographical information. Each Senatorial website will be worth 40 points, accounting for 20% of each course. Students will need to complete their websites by February 24.

Suspect Recorded Votes. Each Party Leader, Committee Chair, and Ranking Minority Committee Member will have the power ask for an inquiry into any “Suspect Recorded Vote” cast by any Senator, in committee or in a Session of the Whole. Votes are “suspect” when they appear clearly contrary to the policy preferences of a state, or when cast in favor of a preposterous policy position. Class members who cast “Suspect Recorded Votes” will have the opportunity to explain the vote to the instructor confidentially. In situations where the Instructor is not satisfied with a Senator’s explanation for a vote, a Senator will 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.

P.S. 3130 Course Grade Components: A Summary⁴

	Possible Points	Percentage of Course Grade
Multiple Choice Exam on Lectures	20	10%
Policy Issue Research Paper	60	30%

⁴This does not apply to the Speaker, the Party Leaders or the Committee Chairs. 27.5% 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.

Personal Bill	20	10%
Confidential Note to the Instructor	10	5%
Simcong Attendance	20	10%
Simcong Legislative Effectiveness	30	15%
Senatorial Websites	40	20%

Grade Computations

There are 200 points possible in the course grading. 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.

Final Score	Final Grade No Lower Than
90.0% - 100%	A
88.5% - 89.9%	A-
87.0% - 88.4%	B+
80.0% - 86.9%	B
78.5% - 79.9%	B-
77.0% - 78.4%	C+
70.0% - 76.9%	C
66.0% - 69.9%	C-
60.0% - 65.9%	D

Students who with scores lower than 60.0% will normally fail the course.

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. Although "bonus points" are awarded to students in certain situations, there will be no extra credit for extra work. Students who put "genuine effort" into the course can expect to receive course grades of "A" or "B." Students demonstrate "genuine effort" by at least 90% of the time attending class, effectively presenting research and analysis in the policy issue paper, putting together a complete and thoughtful web page, and participating actively in the simulation.

Some students find the grading standards in P.S. 3130 to be 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 to prepare you for careers in which you will be required to think logically and to write intelligibly.

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.

