

**Introduction to Congress
Boston University
Spring 2025
Thursday 6:30 to 9:30 pm**

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Office hours: By appointment

Congress is a little loved, and little understood institution. At heart, it is a place where 100 senators (representing diverse 50 states), 435 representatives (from even more diverse districts), 5 delegates (DC, Virginia Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands), and 1 resident commissioner (Puerto Rico) are put together and expected to cooperate on public policy, oversight, and more. Yet, love it or not, it is the heart of our national governance system, and its operations and health affect the whole of our political system.

This class aims to deepen students' understanding of the complexities of our national legislature, both in its concept and in its structure and operations. The course also intends to empower students with concepts, knowledge, and skills that enables students to better make sense of why legislators speak and act as they do, and how collective actions small and large can emerge from the interplay of individuals and interests. In short, you will study how a central component of the world's oldest democratic republic functions.

Classes and Readings

There is no book to purchase for this class and all readings are hyperlinked below. For this class to be fun and educational, you will need to read the assignments before class so you can come prepared to talk. Bring your laptop to class.

Assignments and Grading

- 40 percent of your grade is attendance and participation in class;
- 30 percent of your grade is 2 short essays (2 pages each) written in class that are based on the course readings/materials; and
- 30 percent of your grade is the final exam (a 4-page paper).

Note: "Participation" means speaking up and adding substantively to the conversation.

The short papers can be written during class, or you may draft them prior to class and then turn them in on the class date. When writing, please draw upon class reading materials as appropriate, and anything else that you believe is germane. Embed hyperlinks to supporting sources. (Example: The Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act was [signed into law](#) on July 12, 1974.)

There is no class during spring break, which is March 8 to 16.

Final essays are due on May 1. Do not plagiarize or use AI/chatbots in your written work.

Course Schedule and Readings

Module 1: Conceptualizing Congress

Week 1. Intro to class/Why Congress?

- Read: Philip Wallach, “Congress indispensable,” *National Affairs*, <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/congress-indispensable>

Week 2. The role of the legislator

- Listen: “What Are the Job Descriptions of Representatives and Senators? (with Casey Burgat),” Understanding Congress podcast, <https://www.understandingcongress.org/podcast/what-are-the-job-descriptions-of-representatives-and-senators-with-casey-burgat/>

>>In class exercise: Compiling and debating the duties of a legislator.

- Articles I through III of the US Constitution, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>
- Sen. Ted Cruz, speech, January 6, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/ted-cruzs-full-electoral-vote-speech/2021/01/06/fb43b312-3558-43cf-a769-25f0e7b2bd69_video.html.

Module 2. The structure and basic processes of Congress

Week 3. The House of Representatives

- Read: Congressional Research Service, “House Leadership Structure: Overview of Party Organization,”
<https://www.understandingcongress.org/2025/02/02/house-leadership-structure-overview-of-party-organization/>
- Listen: “What Are the Duties of the Speaker of the House of Representatives? (with Paul Ryan),” Understanding Congress podcast,
<https://www.understandingcongress.org/podcast/what-are-the-duties-of-the-speaker-of-the-house-of-representatives-with-paul-ryan/>

>>In class exercise: Reading the party’s rules and the chamber’s rules.

Week 4. The Senate

- Read: Congressional Research Service, “Senate Leadership Structure: Overview of Party Organization,” <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RS20933.html>
- Read: James Wallner, “What makes Senate leaders so powerful?” *LegBranch.org*,
<https://www.legbranch.org/2018-8-1-what-makes-senate-leaders-so-powerful/> (Stop reading right before the text, “PARTY LEADERS AND THE STANDING RULES.”)

Guest speaker.

Week 5. The legislative branch support agencies

- Read: Kevin R. Kosar, “Legislative Branch Support Agencies: What They Are, What They Do, and Their Uneasy Position in Our System of Government,” in *Congress Overwhelmed*,
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/11RkSO21RyXGK56DTM1vrfCwGfYgpCGIF/view?usp=sharing>

Week 6. The Committee System

- Read: Congressional Research Service, “The Committee System in the U.S. Congress,”
<https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RS20794.html>

Guest speaker:

Week 7. The authorizations process

- Watch: Walter Olesczek, The legislative process (overview), Congress.gov, [The Legislative Process: Overview \(Video\)](#)

***In class essay: Topic announced in class.

Week 8. The appropriations process

- Read: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “Introduction to the Federal Budget Process,” <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/3-7-03bud.pdf>

Guest speaker

Week 9. Overseeing the federal government and the private sector

- Read: Congressional Research Service, “Congressional Oversight and Investigations,” <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10015>

Guest speaker

Week 10. Constituent services---including community grants projects

- Read: Read: Congressional Research Service, “Constituent Services: Overview and Resources,” <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R44726.html>

***In class essay: Topic announced in class.

Module 3: Is Congress broken?

Week 11. Blue states and red states: Is Congress polarized?

- Drew DeSilver, “The polarization in today’s Congress has roots that go back decades,” <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/03/10/the-polarization-in-todays-congress-has-roots-that-go-back-decades/>

In class exercise: Is Congress too polarized to get anything done?

Week 12. Getting elected and re-elected: Is there a primary problem?

- Read: Unite Institute, “The primary problem,”
[https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/64a42f84623b7385395ebf12/670415efbdad2dad1f8e8f14_2024%20Primary%20Problem%20_%20Fact%20Sheet_9.27.24%20\(2\).pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/64a42f84623b7385395ebf12/670415efbdad2dad1f8e8f14_2024%20Primary%20Problem%20_%20Fact%20Sheet_9.27.24%20(2).pdf)

Guest speaker:

Week 13. Interest groups, voters, and lobbying: Does Congress suffer demosclerosis?

- Listen: “Does Congress Still Suffer from Demosclerosis? (with Jonathan Rauch),”
Understanding Congress podcast,
<https://www.understandingcongress.org/podcast/does-congress-still-suffer-from-demosclerosis-with-jonathan-rauch/>

Class exercise: Let’s follow the money, <https://www.opensecrets.org/resources/learn/>

Week 14. Final paper due.