

# THE AMERICAN LEGISLATURE

POLS 3202 | Spring 2026

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Classroom: Brewster C-102  
Class time: Tues. & Thurs., 11 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.  
Office hours: Tues. & Thurs., 12:30 to 3:30 p.m.,  
or by appointment

Instructor: Dr. Peter L. Francia  
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*“There are two enemies to every bill proposed in Congress, the fools who favor it and the lunatics who oppose it.” – Anonymous*

*“With Congress, every time they make a joke it’s a law, and every time they make a law it’s a joke.” – Will Rogers*

## COURSE OVERVIEW

This course examines the U.S. Congress. We focus on four core areas: (1) the historical development of Congress and congressional elections; (2) what members of Congress do and how they represent their constituents; (3) party leadership, committees, and the organization of Congress; and (4) how Congress governs and makes policy in a polarized political system. Throughout the semester, you will critically analyze how Congress functions within a democratic system of checks and balances. Central questions include: Why does public approval of Congress remain consistently low while incumbents win reelection at high rates? Should representatives prioritize constituent preferences or exercise independent judgment, even when that judgment proves unpopular? Is democracy better served when members spend more time in their home districts or when they focus on legislating in Washington, D.C.? What role do interest groups play in shaping public policy? Are institutional reforms necessary to improve how Congress functions?

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This is a general education course in the social sciences (GE:SO).<sup>\*</sup> In keeping with ECU’s general education learning goals, successful completion of this course will strengthen your ability to: (1) apply discipline-specific knowledge in the social sciences to explain the key factors that influence social institutions, structures, and processes affecting human behavior and social interaction; (2) explain how cultural and historical contexts shape individual behavior, society, and culture; and (3) apply discipline-specific theories and modes of inquiry in the social sciences to analyze contemporary social, behavioral, or cultural issues.

At the course level, the primary objective is for you to develop a broad and substantive understanding of the U.S. Congress (what it is, how it works, and why it matters). You will be expected to demonstrate factual, applied, and conceptual knowledge of the material by identifying and defining key terms; interpreting the significance of major events; applying theories to real and hypothetical scenarios; comparing competing concepts and perspectives; evaluating political arguments; and proposing solutions to contemporary policy problems.

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<sup>\*</sup> For additional information about general education learning objectives, please see <http://www.ecu.edu/cs-acad/fsonline/customcf/committee/as/SocialSciencesCreditSyllabusInstructions.docx>.

## INSTRUCTIONAL PHILOSOPHY

As a matter of principle, I do not disclose my partisan affiliation. My goal is to present competing political viewpoints fairly and accurately. All students are evaluated on the quality of their reasoning and use of evidence, not on the political positions they hold. My larger and ultimate learning objective in this course is to teach each of you not what to think, but rather how to think about politics and government.

## COURSE STRUCTURE

Each class begins with a lecture on the topic listed in the course outline and moves into discussion. I expect you to come prepared to ask questions and participate actively. Completing the assigned readings and attending class regularly improves the quality of discussion, debate, and engagement with course material.

To incorporate visual learning in the classroom, and to help generate additional thought on the subjects covered in the course, I often show video material in class. This includes televised news footage of various historical events, documentaries, and political films. Some documentaries or films carry an R rating. If you have moral, religious, political, or other objections to viewing such material, please speak with me in advance.

## REQUIRED READINGS

(1) *Congress and Its Members*, 19<sup>th</sup> ed., by Roger H. Davidson, Walter J. Oleszek, Frances E. Lee, Eric Schickler, and James Curry (Sage, 2024) and (2) selected readings on Canvas.

## EVALUATION

Your final grade in the course will be based on your exam scores and your class attendance. Your fourth exam on May 6 is cumulative (covers all the course material), but also optional. It will replace your lowest exam grade. The weights assigned to your exams and class attendance are as follows:

- (1) Exam 1 on February 12 is worth 27% of your overall grade.
- (2) Exam 2 on March 26 is worth 27% of your overall grade.
- (3) Exam 3 on April 23 is worth 27% of your overall grade.
- (4) Optional: Exam 4 on May 6 (replaces your lowest exam grade).
- (5) Class attendance is worth the remaining 19% of your overall grade.

Course averages will be converted to letter grades using the scale below:

Course Average	Grade	Course Average	Grade
93 and above =	A	73 to 76 =	C
90 to 92 =	A-	70 to 72 =	C-
87 to 89 =	B+	67 to 69 =	D+
83 to 86 =	B	63 to 66 =	D
80 to 82 =	B-	60 to 62 =	D-
77 to 79 =	C+	Below 60 =	F

## **CLASS ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION**

Attendance is worth 19% of your grade because consistent presence in class is the best predictor of success in this course. Exams are built from lecture and discussion, so being here is essential. Attending also provides the opportunity to hear classmates' questions, which can help clarify challenging concepts. This policy ensures that students who commit to showing up are rewarded, and that those who do not cannot rely solely on exam days for their grade. Attendance will be recorded using a sign-in sheet circulated at the beginning of each lecture. It is your responsibility to sign the sheet if you are present. Excessive lateness or leaving class early will result in partial credit for attendance. Your attendance grade will be calculated based on the percentage of classes you attend (for example, attending every class earns a 100, attending half of the classes earns a 50).

## **CLASSROOM RULES**

I expect all students to observe some basic rules of courtesy and respect, which include the following: (1) arrive to class on time and do not leave before class is dismissed; (2) do not pack up your things early; (3) silence on your cell phones before class begins; (4) no laptop use during video screenings; (5) no earbuds, AirPods, or other listening devices; and (6) please be courteous to your classmates and respectful of your fellow students' views, comments, and questions. Classroom discussion is meant to allow us to hear a variety of viewpoints, and this can only happen if we respect each other and our differences. Not following these expectations will lower your attendance grade. For more extreme violations of classroom behavior, the ECU Faculty Manual (Part 5) states that "students who do not follow reasonable standards of behavior in the classroom or other academic setting may be removed from the course by the instructor following appropriate notice."

## **EXAM RULES AND POLICIES**

Failure to be present for any of the scheduled exams will result in an automatic "0." On all exam dates, please come prepared with an exam book and a pen. If you cannot attend the exam, you must contact me at least 30 minutes before I have administered the test (except in cases of sudden emergencies). I will grant a make-up exam only for circumstances that I deem extraordinary or for circumstances that meet university guidelines. If you miss the exam because of an illness, you are still required to contact me before the exam. You must also present me with proper verification (see below).

## **EXCUSED ABSENCES AND VERIFICATION**

I will excuse absences, including those on exam dates, for the following reasons: (1) participation in an authorized activity as an official representative of the university (this includes athletic events, university-sponsored performances, or academic conferences); (2) participation in other activities deemed by the Dean of Students to warrant an excused absence; (3) an extreme personal emergency; (4) the death of an immediate family member; (5) participation in a religious holiday; and (6) health reasons such as an incapacitating or contagious illness or unavoidable surgery. If your absence meets any of the criteria mentioned above, I will need you to present me with some form of verification no later than one week after the absence. Some acceptable forms of verification include the following: a note from Student Health Services; a note from a doctor or medical office; an obituary; or official documentation from the athletic department indicating your travel schedule. I ask that you please not schedule non-emergency medical appointments during our class time.

## CONTINUITY OF INSTRUCTION

In the event of a health-related crisis, weather-related disruption, or campus emergency that would prevent us from meeting face-to-face, class may be moved to an online format for up to two weeks. I will provide details via e-mail and Canvas on exactly how we will proceed if something like that occurs. All necessary course materials, including my lectures (in PowerPoint slides), will be made available on Canvas. If you experience poor internet access, please contact me within 48 hours of the announcement to arrange an alternative plan for accessing the course materials.

## ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

East Carolina University is committed to fostering a vibrant community of scholars. Academic integrity is a fundamental component of achieving this goal. All ECU students are expected to complete their academic work honestly. I will not tolerate acts of cheating, plagiarism, falsification, multiple submissions, or attempting or assisting with an academic integrity violation. These acts are defined as:

**Cheating:** Unauthorized aid or assistance or the giving or receiving of unfair advantage on any form of academic work.

**Plagiarism:** Copying the language, structure, ideas, and/or thoughts of another and adopting the same as one's own original work.

**Falsification/Fabrication:** The statement of any untruth, either spoken or written, regarding any circumstances related to academic work. This includes any untrue statements made regarding a suspected Academic Integrity Violation.

**Multiple Submission:** The submission of substantial portions of the same academic work for credit more than once without authorization from the faculty member who receives the later submission.

**Violation Assistance:** Knowingly helping or attempting to help someone else in an act that constitutes an Academic Integrity Violation.

**Violation Attempts:** Attempting any act that, if completed, would constitute an Academic Integrity Violation as defined herein.

If I become aware of a potential academic integrity violation, I will meet with you following the procedures outlined in the Academic Integrity policy. Should I determine that an academic integrity violation has taken place, I reserve the right to assign a grade penalty up to and including an F for the course. For additional information about ECU's Academic Integrity Policy, please see: <https://faculty senate.ecu.edu/manual/part6-section2/>.

## USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

You may use artificial intelligence tools for limited academic support, including generating study questions, drafting outlines, summarizing course material for study purposes, or editing your own writing. You may not use AI tools to produce full essays or assignments in place of your own work. All submitted work must reflect your own thinking and understanding of the course material. If you have questions about acceptable uses of AI, ask me before submitting an assignment.

## **E-MAIL**

I use e-mail to communicate announcements and information to the entire class. Please check your ECU e-mail regularly. E-mail is also the best way to contact me. You may use it to schedule a one-on-one meeting if my office hours conflict with your schedule. If you have specific questions about the course material, I will answer them by e-mail. If you are having broader difficulty understanding the course, I encourage you to schedule a one-on-one meeting instead. Please do not use e-mail to request information already listed in the syllabus, such as exam dates or grade weights.

## **OFFICE HOURS AND APPOINTMENTS**

My office hours are 12:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. every Tuesday and Thursday (in Brewster A-101). You do not need an appointment during this time. Please feel free simply to come by to discuss the course material or anything else that is on your mind. If you cannot meet during office hours, contact me after class, by telephone, or by e-mail to schedule an appointment. I also welcome students to join me for coffee after class. Please ask if you are interested.

## **INFORMATION ABOUT UNIVERSITY CLOSINGS**

If you have questions about a possible school closing due to severe weather or other reasons, please call the University Emergency Telephone Number at 252-328-0062 or visit the ECU emergency alert website (<http://www.ecu.edu/alert>). In the event the university has not canceled classes, but you commute to campus from a considerable distance and believe driving conditions may be hazardous, please contact me and I will consider excusing your absence.

## **DISABILITY SERVICES**

East Carolina University seeks to comply fully with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Reasonable accommodations will be made for students with verifiable disabilities. In order to take advantage of available accommodations, students must be registered with the Department for Disability Support Services located in Mendenhall 109. For additional information, please review ECU's policy on accommodation requests (<https://accessibility.ecu.edu/students/request-accommodations>) or call 252-737-1016. Additional DSS information and processes can be found at <https://accessibility.ecu.edu/students/dss-guidelines>.

## COURSE SCHEDULE AND OUTLINE

### **Week 1 (Jan. 13 and Jan. 15). Overview and Historical Foundations of Congress**

January 13. Course expectations and the basics of Congress

January 15. The evolution of the modern Congress

- Reading for Week 1: *Congress and Its Members*, Chapters 1-2

### **Week 2 (Jan. 20 and Jan. 22). Gerrymandering and Its Consequences**

January 20. Apportionment and re-districting

January 22. Documentary: *Gerrymandering*

- Reading for Week 2: *Congress and Its Members*, Chapter 3

### **Week 3 (Jan. 27 and Jan. 29). Running for Congress: The Rules**

January 27. Candidate-centered versus party-centered elections

January 29. Campaign finance law

- Reading for Week 3: Canvas reading, “The Strategic Context” (Herrnson et al.)

### **Week 4 (Feb. 3 and Feb. 5). Running for Congress: Winning the Party Nomination**

February 3. The primary election campaign

February 5. Documentary: *Can Mr. Smith Get to Washington Anymore?*

- Reading for Week 4: Canvas reading, “Candidates and Nominations” (Herrnson et al.)

### **Week 5 (Feb. 10 and Feb. 12). Running for Congress: Winning Office / Exam**

February 10. The general election campaign

February 12. **Exam #1**

- Reading for Week 5: *Congress and Its Members*, Chapter 4

### **Week 6 (Feb. 17 and Feb. 19). Serving the People at Home and in Washington**

February 17. What is the job of a representative: Delegate or trustee?

February 19. Hill styles and Home styles

- Reading for Week 6: *Congress and Its Members*, Chapter 5, and Canvas reading, “David McIntosh and Lindsey Graham: Constituency Connections” (Fenno)

### **Week 7 (Feb. 24 and Feb. 26). Congressional Leaders**

February 24. Leadership positions and the Speakerships of Thomas Reed and Joe Cannon

February 26. The Class of '74, the Gingrich Revolution, and polarization

- Reading for Week 7: *Congress and Its Members*, Chapter 6

### **Week 8 (Mar. 3 and Mar. 5). Congressional Committees**

March 3. Functions and responsibilities of congressional committees

March 5. Congressional committee chairs and committee procedures

- Reading for Week 8: *Congress and Its Members*, Chapter 7

### **Week 9 (Mar. 10 and Mar. 12). Spring Break**

### **Week 10 (Mar. 17 and Mar. 19). Congressional Rules and Procedures**

March 17. Rules and procedures in the House

March 19. Rules and procedures in the Senate

- Reading for Week 10: *Congress and Its Members*, Chapter 8

### **Week 11 (Mar. 24 and Mar. 26). Decision Making in Congress / Exam**

March 24. Inside and outside pressures: What shapes final roll-call votes on legislation

March 26. **Exam #2**

- Reading for Week 11: *Congress and Its Members*, Chapter 9

### **Week 12 (Mar. 31 and Apr. 2). Congress in a System of Checks and Balances**

March 31. Legislative-executive conflict and cooperation

April 2. The Supreme Court as policymaker and legislative check on the judiciary

- Reading for Week 12: *Congress and Its Members*, Chapters 10 and 12

### **Week 13 (Apr. 7 and Apr. 9). Congress and Organized Interests**

April 7. Lobbying activities

April 9. Access and influence

- Reading for Week 13: *Congress and Its Members*, Chapter 13, and Canvas reading, “Interests, Constituents, and Policy Making” (Lee)

### **Week 14 (Apr. 14 and Apr. 16). Budgetary and Domestic Policy**

April 14. Congressional budgeting

April 16. Comparing congressional influence on domestic versus foreign policy

- Reading for Week 14: *Congress and Its Members*, Chapter 14

### **Week 15 (Apr. 21 and Apr. 23). Congress and the Cold War / Exam**

April 21. Documentary: *The True Story of Charlie Wilson*

April 23. **Exam #3**

- Reading for Week 15: Canvas reading, “Foreign Affairs and War” (Deering)

**Week 16 (Apr. 28 and Apr. 30). No class**

**Week 17 (May 6). EXAM WEEK**

May 6. **Exam #4.** This is an optional final exam that you can use to replace your lowest exam grade. It is scheduled from 11:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.