

The American Congress

PLS 324 | Fall 2026
Course Syllabus

TIME:	Mon./Wed. 3:00–4:20 PM	INSTRUCTOR:	Iliya Liampert
LOCATION:	Wells Hall A304	OFFICE:	S230, S. Kedzie Hall
ZOOM:	Zoom (passcode: <i>liampert</i>)	HOURS:	Mon./Wed. 2:00–3:00 PM or by appointment
E-MAIL:	liampert@msu.edu		

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This undergraduate course is designed to introduce students to the building blocks that constitute the United States Congress. We will be reading a mixture of textbook chapters, academic articles, and online resources. During the course, we will explore the historical context in which Congress originated, what shaped the modern iteration of the institution, who participates in it, and what exactly legislators do. In addition, we will cover the interaction between Congress and other branches, interest groups, and the media. Because this is an introductory undergraduate course, there is no formal prerequisite.

COURSE-LEVEL LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- ▶ Trace the historical development of Congress from the Constitutional founding to the present-day institution.
- ▶ Analyze how congressional rules, committees, and party leadership structure the legislative process.
- ▶ Evaluate Congress's institutional relationships with the presidency, the courts, the bureaucracy, and organized interests.
- ▶ Apply concepts from the assigned readings to current developments in American politics, both in writing and in class discussion.

TEXTBOOKS AND COURSE MATERIALS

-  **REQUIRED TEXTBOOK:** *Congress and Its Members, 19th Edition* by Roger H. Davidson, Walter J. Oleszek, Frances E. Lee, and Eric Schickler. **You may use 18th Edition.**
-  **D2L READINGS:** All non-textbook readings — book chapters, CRS reports, academic articles, and multimedia — are posted on D2L or linked directly in the schedule below.

GRADING SCHEME

- **10%** — Class Participation
- **25%** — Weekly Online Quizzes
- **25%** — Midterm Exam (In-Class)
- **25%** — Final Exam (In-Class)
- **15%** — Legislative History Project
 - Draft: **5%**
 - Final Paper: **10%**

GPA SCALING

92–100 points → GPA: 4.0

86–91 points → GPA: 3.5

80–85 points → GPA: 3.0

75–79 points → GPA: 2.5

70–74 points → GPA: 2.0

65–69 points → GPA: 1.5

60–64 points → GPA: 1.0

0–59 points → GPA: 0.0

CLASS PARTICIPATION (10%)

You will be expected to attend lectures. It is crucial for you to be present to succeed in this course. Your regular attendance will ensure you get the best possible evaluation, since these are the easiest points to earn. You will have 2 free absences, not including excused absences. If you exceed it, I will deduct 1% from your attendance grade for each additional absence.

WEEKLY ONLINE QUIZZES (25%)

Quizzes are used as an encouragement for students to engage with the readings and the lecture. You will have to take about 12-15 quizzes during the semester. All of the quizzes will be available on D2L. Because of the class size, it is not easy to allow students to retake the quiz. Instead of retaking, I will drop your two lowest grades, regardless of the reason behind them. The weekly online quizzes will be **due every Friday at 11:59 PM**. No late submissions will be accepted.

MIDTERM (25%)

For the midterm assignment, **on October 21st** you will have **in-class exam**. You will be given multiple choice and open-ended questions from the topics we have covered thus far. Your responses will need to demonstrate your understanding of the assigned readings, lectures, and class discussions. Since the midterm exam is in-class, you will need to use your own words and understanding to accurately answer the questions and apply key concepts.

FINAL (25%)

For the final exam, **on December 16th** you again will have **in-class exam**. You will once again be given multiple choice and open-ended questions from the topics we have covered in the second part of the semester.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY (15%)

This is the central assignment that will test your historical knowledge and analytical ability to show the intricacy of the legislative process and how major political decisions are made within the walls of Congress. To do that, you are required to write a paper 2 to 3 pages in length, analyzing the process of how a specific piece of legislation was considered, debated, and passed within its unique historical context. Students are encouraged to use library resources, as well as governmental archives available online (e.g., [congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov)).

Prior to writing your legislative history, you will need to produce a *project advance* that will answer two key questions: **1)** what the law you chose does or sought to do, and **2)** how influential was this law on the daily lives of citizens? This summary needs to be no longer than 3 paragraphs and is required to be submitted **by September 25th**. You will need to get my approval for the law you have chosen in order to proceed.

Upon receiving the approval, you will need to produce a paper that covers **three** central topics: 1) *historical context* in which this law was deliberated, 2) *procedural politics* that affected the passage, and 3) *key members of Congress* who played a role in passing this law.

1) *Historical context* section requires you to engage with a historical period of the law you have chosen. Discuss the socio-political state in which the United States found itself. For instance, were there major protest movements that rallied for or against this law? Write about what you think is the most interesting.

2) *Procedural politics* section pushes you to engage with the practical rule-based mechanisms that drive daily life in the U.S. Capitol. Write about committee and floor considerations, whether it was a bipartisan bill or only one party spearheaded the efforts, and whether all institutional actors were in agreement or fought to stop the passage. (Hint: you can find a lot about the procedural politics of a specific bill on [congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov))

3) *Key members* section asks you to discuss important figures that shaped this law or are associated with the passage. You can broadly discuss the career of this member, their contribution to the law, or anything else you find interesting and important in relation to the law.

You will need to submit a draft of your paper to me **by November 20th**. I would expect to see some progress on your projects, such as detailed outlines or written sections. **This draft will be 5% of the grade.**

The final version of the paper is due **December 11th** and **will be 10% of the grade.**

COURSE READING SCHEDULE

Week	Dates (Mo/We)	Topic, Textbook Chapter, and Readings
1	8/31 & 9/2	Introductions: What Is Congress? <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 1 — The Two Congresses <i>Readings:</i> Article I of the U.S. Constitution
2	9/7 & 9/9	Congress in Historical Context Mon. 9/7: Labor Day — no class <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 2 — Evolution of the Modern Congress <i>Readings:</i> “Why 435?” — Steve’s Notes on Congressional Politics [LINK]
3	9/14 & 9/16	Recruitment and Membership <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 3 — Going For It: Recruitment and Candidacy <i>Readings:</i> MIT Election Lab, Redistricting [LINK]
4	9/21 & 9/23	Membership in Congress: Representation, Goals & Strategies Mon. 9/21: Prerecorded lecture, no in-person class <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 5 — Being There: Hill Styles and Home Styles <i>Readings:</i> “Roles, Goals, and Styles” — Steve’s Notes on Congressional Politics [LINK] Legislative History Project Advance due Fri. 9/25, 11:59 PM.
5	9/28 & 9/30	Congressional Parties & Their Leaders <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 6 — Leaders and Parties in Congress <i>Readings:</i> Aldrich, John. 2011. <i>Why Parties?</i> Ch. 2 – Why Parties Form [On D2L]
6	10/5 & 10/7	The Committee System <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 7 — Committees: Workshops of Congress <i>Readings:</i> Frisch and Kelly. 2006. <i>Committee Assignment Politics.</i> Ch. 9 [On D2L]
7	10/12 & 10/14	The Rules of the Game <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 8 — Congressional Rules and Procedures <i>Readings:</i> “Adopting, Reforming, and Breaking the Rules” — Steve’s Notes on Congressional Politics [LINK]
8	10/19 & 10/21	Voting on the Floor In-Class Midterm on Wed. 10/21! <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 9 — Decision Making in Congress <i>Readings:</i> “Regular Order” — Steve’s Notes on Congressional Politics [LINK]
9	10/26 & 10/28	Congress & Interest Groups Mon. 10/26–Tue. 10/27: Fall Break — no class <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 13 — Congress and Organized Interests <i>Readings:</i> Drutman, Lee. 2015. <i>The Business of America is Lobbying.</i> Ch. 4 – How and Why Corporations Lobby [On D2L]
10	11/2 & 11/4	Congressional Campaigns & Elections Midterm Elections Are This Week <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 4 — Making It: The Electoral Game <i>Online Sources to Play With:</i> Silver Bulletin [LINK] & VoteHub [LINK]
11	11/9 & 11/11	Congress & the President <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 10 — Congress and the President <i>Readings:</i> Liampert et al. 2026. <i>Who Gets to Govern? Diversity in Executive Appointments</i> [On D2L]
12	11/16 & 11/18	Congress & the Bureaucracy <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 11 — Congress and the Bureaucracy <i>Readings:</i> McCubbins and Schwartz. 1984. <i>Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols versus Fire Alarms</i> [On D2L] Draft due Fri. 11/20, 11:59 PM.
13	11/23 & 11/25	Congress & the Courts Mon. 11/23 & Wed. 11/25: Prerecorded lectures, no in-person class. <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 12 — Congress and the Courts <i>Readings:</i> Lane, Elizabeth. 2022. <i>A Separation-of-Powers Approach to the Supreme Court’s Shrinking Caseload</i> [On D2L]

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Course Reading Schedule (continued)

Week	Dates (Mo/We)	Topic, Textbook Chapter, and Readings
14	11/30 & 12/2	Congress & Budget Politics <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 14 — Congress, Budgets, and Domestic Policy Making; Ch. 15 — Congress and National Security Policies
15	12/7 & 12/9	Future Challenges <i>Textbook:</i> Ch. 16 — The Two Congresses and the American People <i>Readings:</i> Maltzman, Sigelman, & Binder. 1996. <i>Leaving Office Feet First: Death in Congress</i> , PS Legislative History final paper due Fri. 12/11, 11:59 PM.

COURSE POLICIES

D2L and Technical Support

Use D2L to submit your assignments, check announcements and updates about the class, and see your grades. For technical support, please see:

- Visit the MSU Help site at help.msu.edu
- Visit the Desire2Learn Help Site at help.d2l.msu.edu
- Call the MSU IT Service Desk at (517) 432-6200, (844) 678-6200, or e-mail ithelp@msu.edu

Behavior During Class

In order to succeed as students, we need a space full of passion for knowledge, patience, and respect for others. It is imperative that students follow proper classroom behavior, characterized by respect, professionalism, and active participation. Rude behavior and discrimination of any kind towards other students and the instructor will not be tolerated. Active participation is encouraged; however, be mindful of your fellow students and the instructor. Punctuality is key, and if you must arrive late, do so discreetly.

Names and Pronouns

Respect for others and feeling secure are key to a successful life and career. If you wish, you are welcome to share your preferred name and pronouns during our first class or by email. Please send an update if your preferred name and/or pronouns change and you would like me to know.

Academic Integrity, Honesty, and Generative AI

Plagiarism and other kinds of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. All work you produce during the semester is expected to be original work produced individually or in a group. Violations of this policy include cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, lying, bribery, and threatening behavior. Students found engaging in the above will be subject to both academic sanctions from the instructor and non-academic sanctions (e.g., expulsion). **IMPORTANT NOTE:** This class prohibits the use of generative AI tools (ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, etc.) and treats their use for the purposes of completing a homework assignment as cheating. Please refrain from using AI for this class. For more information, refer to the Office of the University Ombudsperson.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Michigan State University is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services, and activities. Requests for accommodations by persons with disabilities may be made by contacting the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities at 517-884-RCPD or on the web at rcpd.msu.edu. Once your eligibility for an accommodation has been determined, you will be issued a Verified Individual Services Accommodation ("VISA") form. Please present this form to the instructor at the start of the term and/or two weeks prior to the accommodation date (test, project, etc.). Requests received after this date will be honored whenever possible.

Mental Health

Managing academic and personal lives can be hard. Students often experience issues that may interfere with academic success, such as academic stress, sleep problems, juggling responsibilities, life events, relationship concerns, or feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, or depression. If you or a friend is struggling, please know that you are not alone and reach out for help. Helpful, effective resources are available on campus, most of them free of charge.

- If you are struggling with this class, please visit during office hours or contact me by email at liampert@msu.edu.
- Meet with your academic advisor if you are struggling in multiple classes, unsure whether you are making the most of your time at MSU, or unsure what academic resources are available at MSU.
- Visit **CAPS MSU** for online health assessments, hours, and additional information.
- Drop by Counseling & Psychiatric Services (CAPS) main location for a same-day mental health screening (3rd floor of Olin Health Center at 463 E. Circle Drive).
- Call CAPS at **(517) 355-8270** any time, day or night.
- 24-Hour MSU Sexual Assault Crisis Line: (517) 372-6666, or visit **Center For Survivors**.

MSU Web Access Policy

MSU Religious Observation Policy