PPHA 31850
Legislative Politics
(Spring 2025)

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1 Instructor: contact information

- **Adam Zelizer**

    - **Email:** zelizer@uchicago.edu
    - **Class time:** M, W, 9:00-10:20pm
    - **Classroom:** Keller TBD

2 Canvas website

I will post course materials on Canvas, including assignments, readings, or other materials. Please email me if you are not able to access the Canvas site or if any materials are missing.

3 Course description

Legislatures have been called the "central citadels" of democracy and the chief defense against dictatorship. Today, there is a widespread view that legislatures are broken. From city councils and state legislatures to Congress and the UK Parliament to the European Parliament and the United Nations, legislatures seem unable to address society's problems. Their failures give space for populist demagogues and the erosion of democracy.

This course will introduce students to the policymaking process and politics of legislatures. We will study legislative institutions; the decision-making processes of individual legislators; and the role of outside advocates and interests. Our goal is to understand how legislatures work - in terms of producing policy that incorporates expertise and responds to policy demands from the public - and why they often don't.

Methodologically, the course aims to build and expand on the skills that students are developing in all Harris public policy master's programs: microeconomics, statistics, analytical politics. We use formal mathematical models (mostly game theory) to think about how legislators act strategically within given contexts. We complement this formal analysis by studying empirical research to explore theoretical models and gain insight into real-world events. The course assignments require students to work on strategic thinking, to interpret empirical findings, and to strengthen written communication skills that allow students to advocate for policy or procedural reforms to improve legislative performance.

4 Logistics

This is a nine-week course and the course material has been organized into nine modules (i.e., one module per week). Each module will focus on one pathology of legislatures. The content of each module is discussed in section 6.

4.1 Lectures

Each lecture will include both technical and practical discussions of the topic in that module. I will provide detailed walkthroughs of theoretical models that address key concepts in for that module. The concepts developed in the models will be useful for the analysis of empirical research the course project.

Each class will also include discussion of empirical applications of the theoretical models. The academic articles reflect the best empirical research on the topic in that module. Many of them include advanced statistical methods and analyses, and as a result I expect there will be parts of most papers that are difficult to follow. **That is why we will discuss the articles together in class.** If you find the articles too lengthy or dense, you may consider reading the abstract, introduction, and conclusion (the so-called "graduate student read"). We are reading them because they offer the best evidence available to learn about legislatures, and even if there are some elements that are difficult, the main takeaways of each article should be informative about the key concepts we are covering in the course.

4.2 Office hours

All office hours will be available by appointment. Please do not hesitate to ask for a meeting! Talking with students about the course, or about your interests and experience in policymaking, is one of my joys in teaching. Holding office hours by appointment is intended to make sure I am available to you whenever your schedule permits, including nights and weekends. Before and after class will often be good times to meet.

5 Evaluations

Students will be evaluated based on three components. First, two short online assessments (20% total). Second, a reading response to one of the course readings (20% total). Third, a quarter-long research project (60%). **Notice that there will be no midterm or final exam.**

1. **Online assessments:** There will be two online reading assessments, which will be posted on Canvas under the Assignments tab at least one week before they are due. They must be submitted on Canvas before midnight on the date specified. The assessments are meant to judge whether students are absorbing key concepts from the readings and lectures.

2. **Reading response:** Each student must pick one paper from the syllabus and write a (max 2 page) reading response. I leave it up to the student to discuss the paper as they see fit, but below are a list of questions that I share with PhD students about how to evaluate papers. Some of the points are a bit technical, or targeted for empirical papers, so you may prefer to focus on the more substantive questions and conclusions papers reach than their methods. **Students may work in groups of up to 4 students.**

   (a) What is the question? Is it interesting? A well-written paper will answer this question quickly. As soon as you identify the question, you should ask whether it

is truly interesting. Is it intrinsically interesting, is it relevant for policy, or does it make progress in light of an existing, interesting literature?

(b) Has this question already been answered well in previous papers? What contributions does the paper make over previous studies?

(c) Before reading too far, think about how you would answer this question. What would you do if you had to write a paper on this question? This will help in your subsequent evaluations.

(d) What is the empirical strategy? Think about the quantity being estimated. How does it relate to the question of the paper? What is the source of exogenous variation being used? What identification assumptions are necessary? Are these assumptions plausible? Are they clarified by the author and well justified?

(e) What data are being used? How were they collected? How are the variables defined? What is the unit of observation? Are these choices appropriate?

(f) Did the authors appropriately interpret their results? Did they interpret their results in substantively meaningful ways? Did they conflate statistical and substantive significance?

3. **Research project:** Students will work on a research project throughout the quarter. Each student must work on answering a specific policy and procedural question of their choice (i.e, a real problem facing a real legislature). There are two possibilities for these questions. First, students can work on a policy question that a legislature is facing. For example, "*How should Illinois address its unfunded pension obligations*" or "*How has Illinois' recent bail reform affected crime rates?*" These issues need not relate to Illinois; any legislature, from a city council to school board to national legislature are fair game. Second, students may also choose a topic related to procedure rather than policy. For instance, "*What are the anticipated effects of eliminating the filibuster*" or "*How can Congress re-establish regular order and committee power in the legislative process?*" Bear in mind that these are just examples and I encourage students to be creative and truly connect the project to their policy interests. My goal is to share your projects with a relevant legislator or interest group at the conclusion of the course.

As part of the work on the project, students must deliver several outputs throughout the quarter. In total, these outputs represent 60% of the final grade. **Students may work in groups of up to 4 students.**

- **Project proposal (0%):** Each student must submit a proposal indicating the specific topic/question they will work on, the scope of the project, and target audience (legislature or legislator). This proposal is meant to allow me to provide feedback, and as such it is ungraded. Maximum length: 1 page (12 pt font, single spacing). Tentative due date: April 18.

- **Op-ed (30%):** Each student must submit a short article in the style of a newspaper op-ed that includes the specific policy question under study, some of the main issues involved and preliminary policy recommendations. This is not meant to be a comprehensive treatment of the question, but rather an eye-catching piece that

is addressed at a general public, raises interesting issues and provides a glimpse of an answer. The op-ed is worth 30% of the final grade. Maximum length: 2 pages (12 pt font, 1.5 line spacing). Tentative due date: May 9.

- **Policy memo (30%):** Each student must submit a final policy memo that lays out in more detail the question, methodology, findings and recommendations from the research project. The memo must be addressed to a relevant specialized audience (e.g. legislator, parliamentary committee, funding agency, NGO) and provide evidence of rigorous, careful analysis (though this analysis need not be quantitative in nature). The policy memo is worth 30% of the final grade. Maximum length: 5 pages (12 pt font, 1.5 line spacing). Tentative due date: May 27.

6 Course schedule

- Week 1: Chaos

  Lecture: McKelvey's Chaos Theorem, A Model of Agenda Setting

  Readings:

  - Binder, Sarah. "The dysfunctional congress." Annual Review of Political Science 18 (2015): 85-101.
  - Shepsle, Kenneth A., and Barry R. Weingast. "Positive theories of congressional institutions." Legislative Studies Quarterly (1994): 149-179.
  - Cox, Gary W. "The Organization of Democratic Legislatures." The Oxford handbook of political economy 4 (2006): 141.

  Supplemental Readings:

  - Plott, Charles R. "A notion of equilibrium and its possibility under majority rule." The American Economic Review 57.4 (1967): 787-806.

- Week 2: Special interests

  Lecture: Distributive Models, Structure Induced Equilibrium, Bargaining

  Readings:

  - Shepsle, Kenneth A., and Barry R. Weingast. "Structure-induced equilibrium and legislative choice." Public choice 37 (1981): 503-519.
  - Weingast, Barry and Marshall, V. J. "The industrial organization of Congress: Or, why legislatures, like firms, are not organized as markets." The Journal of Political Economy 96.1 (1988): 132-163.
  - Baron, David P., and John A. Ferejohn. "Bargaining in legislatures." American political science review 83.4 (1989): 1181-1206.
  - Romer, Thomas, and Howard Rosenthal. "Political resource allocation, controlled agendas, and the status quo." Public choice (1978): 27-43.

  Supplemental Readings:

- Adler, E. Scott, and John S. Lapinski. "Demand-side theory and congressional committee composition: A constituency characteristics approach." American Journal of Political Science (1997): 895-918.
- Berry, Christopher R., and Anthony Fowler. "Congressional committees, legislative influence, and the hegemony of chairs." Journal of Public Economics 158 (2018): 1-11.

- Week 3: Information

  Lecture: Cheap talk, expertise, specialization

  Readings:

  - Gilligan, Thomas W., and Keith Krehbiel. "Collective decisionmaking and standing committees: An informational rationale for restrictive amendment procedures." The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization 3.2 (1987): 287-335.
  - Kingdon, John W. Congressmen's voting decisions. University of Michigan Press, 1989.
  - Zelizer, Adam. "How responsive are legislators to policy information? Evidence from a field experiment in a state legislature." Legislative Studies Quarterly 43.4 (2018): 595-618.

  Supplemental Readings:

  - Krehbiel, Keith. Information and legislative organization. University of Michigan Press, 1992.
  - Curry, James M. Legislating in the Dark: Information and Power in the House of Representatives. University of Chicago Press, 2015.
  - Jones, Bryan D., and Frank R. Baumgartner. The politics of attention: How government prioritizes problems. University of Chicago Press, 2005.
  - Matthews, Donald R., and James R. Stimson. Yeas and nays: Normal decision-making in the US House of Representatives, 1975.

- Week 4: Partisanship

  Lecture: Party cartels, polarization

  Readings:

  - Krehbiel, Keith. "Where's the Party?." British Journal of Political Science 23.2 (1993): 235-266.
  - Sinclair, Barbara. "The Dream Fulfilled? Congressional Parties 50 Years After the APSA Report." Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, Washington DC. 2000.
  - Barber, Michael and McCarty, Nolan. "Causes and consequences of polarization." Political negotiation: A handbook 37 (2015): 39-43.

  Supplemental Readings:

- Cox, Gary W., and Mathew D. McCubbins. Legislative leviathan: Party government in the House. Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Rohde, David W. Parties and leaders in the postreform House. University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Aldrich, John H. Why parties?: The origin and transformation of political parties in America. University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Levendusky, Matthew. The partisan sort: How liberals became Democrats and conservatives became Republicans. University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Hall, Andrew B. Who wants to run?: How the devaluing of political office drives polarization. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

- Week 5: Gridlock

  Lecture: Pivotal politics, separation of powers

  Readings:

  - Krehbiel, Keith. Pivotal politics: A theory of US lawmaking. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
  - Dziuda, Wioletta, and Antoine Loeper. "Dynamic pivotal politics." American Political Science Review 112.3 (2018): 580-601.
  - Cameron, Charles, and Nolan McCarty. "Models of vetoes and veto bargaining." Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci. 7 (2004): 409-435.

  Supplemental Readings:

  - Cameron, Charles M. Veto bargaining: Presidents and the politics of negative power. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
  - Mayhew, David R. Divided we govern. New Haven: Yale University, 1991.
  - Binder, Sarah A. "The dynamics of legislative gridlock, 1947–96." American Political Science Review 93.3 (1999): 519-533.

- Week 6: Representation

  Lecture: Selection, Incentives, Beliefs, Responsiveness, Congruence

  Readings:

  - Miller, Warren E., and Donald E. Stokes. "Constituency influence in Congress." American political science review 57.1 (1963): 45-56.
  - Lax, Jeffrey R., and Justin H. Phillips. "Gay rights in the states: Public opinion and policy responsiveness." American Political Science Review 103.3 (2009): 367-386.
  - Butler, Daniel M., and David W. Nickerson. "Can learning constituency opinion affect how legislators vote? Results from a field experiment." Quarterly Journal of Political Science 6.1 (2011): 55-83.

  Supplemental Readings:

- Lax, Jeffrey R., Justin H. Phillips, and Adam Zelizer. "The party or the purse? Unequal representation in the US senate." American Political Science Review 113.4 (2019): 917-940.
- Pereira, Miguel M. "Understanding and reducing biases in elite beliefs about the electorate." American Political Science Review 115.4 (2021): 1308-1324.
- Broockman, David E., and Christopher Skovron. "Bias in perceptions of public opinion among political elites." American Political Science Review 112.3 (2018): 542-563.

- Week 7: Money

  Lecture: Models of Exchange, Subsidy, Persuasion

  Readings:

  - Ansolabehere, Stephen, John M. De Figueiredo, and James M. Snyder Jr. "Why is there so little money in US politics?." Journal of Economic perspectives 17.1 (2003): 105-130.
  - Groseclose, Tim, and James M. Snyder. "Buying supermajorities." American Political Science Review 90.2 (1996): 303-315.
  - Hall, Richard L., and Alan V. Deardorff. "Lobbying as legislative subsidy." American Political Science Review 100.1 (2006): 69-84.

  Supplemental Readings:

  - DellaVigna, Stefano, and Matthew Gentzkow. "Persuasion: empirical evidence." Annu. Rev. Econ. 2.1 (2010): 643-669.
  - Fouirnaies, Alexander, and Anthony Fowler. "Do campaign contributions buy favorable policies? Evidence from the insurance industry." Political Science Research and Methods 10.1 (2022): 18-32.

- Week 8: Capacity

  Lecture: Regular Order, Seniority, Centralization

  Readings:

  - Squire, Peverill. "Measuring state legislative professionalism: The squire index revisited"
  - Crosson, Furnas, LaPira, Burgat. "Partisan Competition and the Decline in Legislative Capacity among Congressional Offices"
  - Carnes, Nicholas and Hansen, Eric. "Does Paying Politicians More Promote Economic Diversity in Legislatures?"
  - Bucchianeri, Peter, Volden, Craig, and Wiseman, Alan. "Legislative Effectiveness in the American States." American Political Science Review 119.1 (2024): 21-39.

  Supplemental Readings:

  - Brookings. "Vital Statistics on Congress"

- Hertel-Fernandez, Alexander. "Who passes business's "model bills"? Policy capacity and corporate influence in US state politics." Perspectives on Politics 12.3 (2014): 582-602.

- Week 9: Reform

  Lecture: Traps, Equity, Strategic Responses

  Readings:

  - Fouirnaies, Alexander. "How do campaign spending limits affect elections? evidence from the united kingdom 1885–2019." American Political Science Review 115.2 (2021): 395-411.
  - Fowler, Anthony. "Electoral and policy consequences of voter turnout: Evidence from compulsory voting in Australia." Quarterly Journal of Political Science 8.2 (2013): 159-182.
  - Ahler, Douglas J., Jack Citrin, and Gabriel S. Lenz. "Do Open Primaries Improve Representation? An Experimental Test of California's 2012 Top-Two Primary." Legislative Studies Quarterly 41.2 (2016): 237-268.

  Supplemental Readings:

  - Santucci, Jack. "Variants of Ranked-Choice Voting from a Strategic Perspective."
  - Gordon, Sanford C., and Dimitri Landa. "Do the advantages of incumbency advantage incumbents?." The Journal of Politics 71.4 (2009): 1481-1498.

7   Academic integrity

The Harris School has a formal policy on academic integrity that you are expected to adhere to. Examples of academic dishonesty include (but are not limited to) turning in someone else's work as your own, copying solutions to past years' problem sets, and receiving any unapproved assistance on exams. **Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated in this course.** All students suspected of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Harris Dean of Students for investigation and adjudication. The disciplinary process can result in sanctions up to and including suspension or expulsion from the University. In addition to disciplinary sanctions, students who commit academic honesty will may also be penalized in their course grades, at the discretion of the instructors.

8   Diversity and inclusion

Consistent with the University of Chicago's commitment to open discourse and free expression, we encourage students to respect and engage with others of differing backgrounds or perspectives, even when the ideas or insights shared may be viewed as unpopular or controversial. Thought-provoking discourse is facilitated when we not only speak freely but also listen carefully and respectfully to others.

9   Accessibility

The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring equitable access to our academic programs and services. Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of academic accommodations by Student Disability Services (SDS) and need a reasonable accommodation(s) to participate fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS for using accommodations. The starting point is to contact disabilities@uchicago.edu. Timely notifications are required in order to ensure that your accommodations can be implemented.

10   Harris Writing Program

If you need help with the written assignments in this course please see the Writing Program. The Writing Fellows and Coaches can help you establish best practices in terms of brain storming, drafting, and editing your assignments, and will critically engage your writing and thinking skills. And if you are an English Language Learner the Writing Program has trained staff on hand to help you with Academic English conventions. Find the Writing Program here.