

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

Posc 105

CONGRESS

I. THIS MORNING:

- A. Congressional structure, leadership, and policy making.
- B. The presidency

II. CONGRESS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE:

A. Functions:

- 1. Legislative or law making
- 2. Representation of geographical and other interests
 - a. Case work: constituency service and the “permanent campaign”
 - b. These are the keys to reelection, not necessarily statesmanship.
- 3. Administrative oversight
- 4. Advise and consent
 - a. A power of the senate
 - b. Examples: Supreme Court nominees, approval of cabinet officers, treaties.
- 5. Investigative (e.g., Thompson committee on campaign finance as illustrated in the film.)
- 6. Judicial: impeachment

B. Structure:

- 1. The House:
 - a. Type of representation, some claim, makes house more “parochial” and subject to narrow interests.
 - b. Size implies more formal rules, disciplined discussion and debate.
 - c. The Rules committee
 - d. Powers
 - (1) The “people’s” house must initiate tax legislation
 - e. Speaker, majority and minority leaders, whips
 - (1) Committees and subcommittees.
 - f. Caucuses
 - g. Campaign committees.
- 2. The Senate
 - a. Broader constituencies
 - b. Longer terms.
 - c. Powers
 - (1) Advise and consent.
 - d. Informality and less rigorous rules.

3. Shared powers and cooperation.
- C. Congressional leadership
 1. Seniority system in slight decline.
 2. Power is based largely on “trust” (*We the People*, page 344), personal skill, and loyalty (e.g., Gingrich).

III. GENERALIZATIONS:

- A. From yesterday’s notes
- B. Legislators have so many responsibilities and are pulled in some many directions that they have relatively little time for deliberation.
 1. Congress is seldom a forum for discussion and debate about national issues and priorities.
- C. Congress’ fragmented power structure, the importance of constituency services, separate constituencies, political independence all diminish accountability and capacity.
 1. Members behave exactly as one would expect political entrepreneurs to act: they assert their independence, attempt to protect and expand their bases of support, bargain for specific benefits rather than rigidly adhere to a party line, listen to those who are most helpful in winning reelection, and the like.
 2. Congressional decision making involves a labyrinth of rules and procedures that help members “hide” from responsibility.
- D. On the other hand, congressional organization and procedures enhance (strong) group influence.
- E. Congress deals mainly with “middle-level” (branch, twig, symbolic, group, and regional) issues.
 1. It does not debate or deliberate about “grand” strategies or policies.
 2. Frequently, if not mostly, it enacts policies in a disjointed fashion.
- F. The only meaningful reforms are those that strengthen party discipline. Until that is done, the system will continue to misfire and accountability remain elusive.
- G. Congress seldom breaks really new ground. It often acts only **after** the public has been “sold” on a policy.

IV. OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY:

- A. The expectations gap: difference between public wants and what a president can do.
 1. Americans expect presidents to be all things to all people.
- B. Presidential popularity frequently declines the longer a president is in office.
 1. See “Presidential Approval Ratings” on the web site.
 - a. The trend shown in the figure summarizes, I think, the American political experience.
- C. At the height of the cold war (about 1966 to 1974) many scholars and journalists fretted about the “imperial presidency.”

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1. The White House, many in and out of Congress felt, needed to be controlled.
 - D. Yet one can argue that power of the presidency is overstated.
 1. Presidents themselves often come to feel frustrated and disappointed.
 2. These feelings have led to enormous antagonisms and brought many presidents into bitter conflict with the media, the Congress, voters, and parties.
 3. Indeed, given expectations and beliefs about presidential power, the office has surprisingly limited power.
 - a. Many of the very institutions, structures, practices, and traditions that seem to give presidents their influence and authority actually limit what they can do.
 - b. Sources of strength are simultaneously sources potential sources of weakness.
 - c. Note, for example, how commonly president “drift” into foreign affairs, an area in which they come to feel more comfortable. Why? Because they may feel they have greater control over foreign policy than domestic politics.
 - E. We’ll examine this argument in the context of attempts to explain presidential successes and failures.
- V. NEXT TIME:
- A. The strengths and weaknesses of the office.
 - B. Film on President Clinton presidency
 - C. Reading:
 1. You should be finished with *Debt and Deficits* shortly.
 - a. The web page (“Political Economy” section) contains some detailed “notes.”