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978-1-107-57178-5 - The American Congress: Ninth Edition

Steven S. Smith, Jason M. Roberts and Ryan J. Vander Wielen

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## THE AMERICAN CONGRESS

### Ninth Edition

The ninth edition of this respected textbook provides a fresh perspective and a crisp introduction to congressional politics. Informed by the authors' Capitol Hill experience and scholarship, the new edition reflects changes in Congress resulting from the November 2014 elections and such developments as (a) a new majority party in the Senate; (b) new campaign spending numbers and election outcomes, rules, committees, leaders, and budget developments; and (c) recent political science literature that provides new perspectives on the institution. The text emphasizes the importance of a strong legislature and has discussion questions and further reading. Alongside clear explanations of congressional rules and the lawmaking process there are examples from contemporary events and debates that highlight Congress as a group of politicians as well as a lawmaking body. These recent developments are presented within the context of congressional political history.

**Steven S. Smith** is a professor of political science, the Kate M. Gregg Distinguished Professor of Social Science, and Director of the Murray Weidenbaum Center on the Economy, Government, and Public Policy at Washington University in St. Louis. He has chaired the Legislative Studies Section of the American Political Science Association and has served on the editorial boards of the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, and *Legislative Studies Quarterly*.

**Jason M. Roberts** is an associate professor of political science at the University of North Carolina. He coedited the book *Why Not Parties? Party Effects in the U.S. Senate* (2009). His articles have been published in the *American Political Science Review*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, and *Legislative Studies Quarterly*.

**Ryan J. Vander Wielen** is an associate professor of political science and (by courtesy) economics at Temple University. His articles have been published in the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, *Political Analysis*, *Public Choice*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and elsewhere.

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# The American Congress

**Ninth Edition**

Steven S. Smith

*Washington University in St. Louis*

Jason M. Roberts

*University of North Carolina*

Ryan J. Vander Wielen

*Temple University*



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PREFACE

The American Congress has long been one of the most powerful legislative bodies in the world. Congress is now struggling with momentous issues such as health care, immigration, worldwide environmental problems, the stabilization of the world financial system, the rehabilitation of America’s infrastructure, funding the U.S. system of retirement security, the war against terrorism, the place of the United States in the post–Cold War world, and the federal budget. These issues present serious challenges. They affect the interests of all Americans, they are highly controversial, and they involve complex public policies.

MAJOR FEATURES OF *THE AMERICAN CONGRESS*

**UNDERSTANDING THE PLACE OF CONGRESS IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY.** Our primary goal in writing this edition is to instill in students and general readers an appreciation for the importance of a strong legislature in the American democracy. Such an appreciation requires an understanding of the constitutional setting in which Congress operates, the basic rules of the electoral and legislative processes, and the resources and strategies of members of Congress and other key players. Each chapter is designed to contribute to the reader’s understanding by introducing key concepts, describing essential details of the process, and outlining general principles for understanding the subject.

**THE CHANGING CONGRESS.** In our efforts to introduce you to congressional politics, we emphasize the evolving nature of Congress. In writing a textbook, it is easy to describe current arrangements and create the impression that the rules and processes described have long been as described and are likely to stay that way for some time. We do not want to create that impression. Congress is

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organized by its members and is frequently changed by its members. Consequently, we emphasize the factors that influence legislators' thinking about their institution. Party conflict, competition with the executive branch, the drive for reelection, and other forces in congressional politics are discussed.

**IMPORTANT IDEAS ABOUT CONGRESS.** We also highlight important ideas in recent public commentary and political science research about Congress and its members. Although we do not organize our discussion around debates in the professional literature on Congress, we do not hesitate to observe differences of opinion among our colleagues in political science on critical subjects. Political scientists have offered competing and insightful perspectives on the sources of the incumbency advantage, the importance and motivations of legislative parties, the power of committees, and other subjects. We provide an accessible and balanced discussion of the deserving perspectives.

**A STARTING POINT FOR YOUR RESEARCH ON CONGRESS.** We provide a starting point for most undergraduate research projects on Congress by including suggested readings at the end of each chapter. We list both classic and recent works that will give you a quick pathway into the political science literature. Because we have provided a wide range of suggested readings, we have limited references to literature in the text.

We have not hidden our enthusiasm for congressional politics. To be sure, Congress is easy to dislike and often difficult to defend. The rough-and-tumble world of legislating is not orderly and civil, human frailties too often taint its membership, and legislative outcomes are often frustrating and ineffective. Still, we are not exaggerating when we say that Congress is essential to American democracy. We would not have survived as a nation without a Congress that represented the diverse interests of our society; conducted a public debate on the major issues; found compromises to resolve conflicts peacefully; and limited the power of our executive, military, and judicial institutions.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

Chapter 1 begins with an overview of the condition of the modern Congress. The chapter gives the reader a look at the general trends in American politics that are shaping the character of congressional policy making. It also reviews recent developments that have changed partisan control of Congress and altered the distribution of power within the institution.

Chapters 2 and 7 survey both constitutional and internal legislative rules to give an integrated perspective on the legislative game. The special character of American national legislative politics is the product of the Constitution, which created three institutions – the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the



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president – and set rules governing their interaction in the process of enacting public laws. In addition, the House and the Senate have developed different rules and practices that have a substantial effect on public policy.

Chapter 3 focuses on congressional elections. It covers the fundamental rules that govern these elections and details the advantages enjoyed by congressional incumbents in their efforts to stay in office. The chapter concludes by evaluating the importance of election outcomes for the policy choices made by Congress and the president.

Chapter 4 focuses on individual members. It begins by reviewing the variety of political goals that members pursue. It also considers the resources that members may mobilize to achieve their goals and the political actors who influence members' behavior. The chapter concludes by looking at the strategies that members pursue in voting and in policy leadership.

Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 concern the central components of the legislative process – parties, committees, and the chamber floors. Parties and committees are not mentioned in the Constitution, yet the interaction of parties and committees defines the decision-making process in the modern Congress. The emphasis is on both the development of congressional parties and committees and the recent changes that have altered the character of congressional decision making in important ways. While detailing the activity that takes place on the House and Senate floors, Chapter 8 concludes with an overall perspective on how parties, committees, and the floors relate to each other.

Chapters 9, 10, and 11 consider the major institutions and organizations with which Congress interacts – the president and executive branch, the courts, and interest groups. In each case, the emphasis is on the way in which the resources and strategies of the institution or organization affect its relations with Congress.

Budget politics and process are the concern of Chapter 12. Budget politics has become a nearly dominant feature of congressional politics, and many important procedural developments have occurred in recent years. This chapter emphasizes the importance of the evolving budget process for the distribution of power in Congress.

## A SPECIAL APPENDIX

We have added an appendix on spatial theories of legislative politics. Spatial theory now plays a central role in the political science of legislative politics. Students at all levels benefit from understanding the basic ideas in spatial theory. We suggest that you read the relevant sections of the appendix along with the core chapters. We think it will enrich your understanding of the political strategies pursued by legislators and presidents and give you some basis for understanding the determinants of legislative outcomes.

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Steven S. Smith, Jason M. Roberts, and Ryan J. Vander Wielen