

## DRAFT COURSE OUTLINE

*A final course syllabus will be available on the first day of class.*

### Congress, Politics and Elections in a Time of Crisis FALL 2020

Instructor: John Lawrence, Ph.D.

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Office hours: TBA

#### **Instructor**

John Lawrence has taught at UCDC since 2013, when he left Capitol Hill after a 38 year career as a staff member in the U.S. House of Representatives, the last eight as Chief of Staff to Speaker Nancy Pelosi. He is the author of *The Class of '74: Congress After Watergate and the Roots of Partisanship* (2018, Johns Hopkins University Press) as well as numerous articles on Congress and national politics. He blogs on American politics at **DOMEocracy** ([johnlawrence.wordpress.com](http://johnlawrence.wordpress.com)) and tweets at [@johnlawrencedc](https://twitter.com/johnlawrencedc). He also is the published author of Sherlock Holmes short stories. He has a Ph.D. in American History from the University of California (Berkeley), and an undergraduate history degree from Oberlin College.

#### **Description**

This course will focus on the performance of Congress, the American government and the electorate during a period in which four historic forces are colliding simultaneously:

- the coronavirus pandemic and related societal disruptions;
- the widespread political/social responses to systemic racism affecting policing and other public institutions and policies;
- the electoral season that elevates partisan anger through the campaigns across the nation; and lastly
- the diminished confidence of the American people in the structure and performance of their own government.

Congress and other branches of the U.S. government were designed nearly two and a half centuries ago under circumstances and reflecting values and philosophies that bear little relationship to contemporary America. All of these institutions have evolved over time in response to changing conditions domestically and internationally; and the American electorate had undergone significant change as well, especially in the last half century. All of these developments place dramatic and consequential pressures on government, elected officials and voters alike. How are they responding and what can we anticipate, based on historical analysis, will change as a result of these unprecedented, simultaneous crises? What is the appropriate level of idealism, pragmatism and collaboration as ways to govern a diverse and divided democracy?

Class meetings will involve discussions of recent developments in the political landscape leading up to and following the November 2020 elections; discussing the implications of the election for congressional reorganization and reform; considering potential new directions for public policy resulting from the 2020 election results; and how these

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emerging adaptations of the political system compare and conflict with the traditional design and operation of the federal government.

Class presentation and discussions will be supplemented with discussion board postings and comments that will be analyzed and critiqued by class members.

In addition to the instructor, periodic guest presenters will include former members of Congress, congressional officers and staff, journalists, congressional scholars and others.

### **Requirements and Evaluation**

Course requirements are: (1) regular class attendance and participation that include familiarity with the readings; (2) two research papers on an assigned topic; (3) discussion board postings and comments. A total of 20 pages of original research material is required.

The following are illustrative topics and readings for class meetings. Students may be asked to present key findings from the readings, offer critiques, or engage in dialogue with other students or guest speakers on particular topics.

***Week 1: Introduction to the Class: Politics in a Time of Crisis***

***Week 2: Whose Idea Was This Anyway? How Has Congress Evolved?***

***Week 3 Does the Majority Decide, and Should It?***

- Discussion Board posting/comment

***Week 4: Congressional Diversity: Is Congress Changing, and Does It Matter?***

***Week 5: “An Oxcart in the Age of the Atom”: How Does Congress Work, and Why Not?***

- Paper Due: *Discussion of the major structural and historical issues that complicate the efficient functioning of the Congress*

***Week 6: The Disappearing Middle: Partisanship, Realignment and the Constant Campaign***

- Discussion Board posting/comment

***Week 7: Differentiation, Disparagement and Denunciation: Political Messaging 101***

***Week 8: ELECTION DAY 2020: What Just Happened? And What Does It Mean?***

***Week 9: The Imperial Presidency and the Resurgent Congress: “When the president does it, it’s not illegal” (Nixon); “I’m the decider” (G.W. Bush); “I’m not a king” (Obama); “I can do whatever I want” (Trump)***

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- **Paper #2 Due:** *Analyze the outcome of the 2020 Election in light of the major themes studied during this class*

**Week 10: Can This System Be Saved? How to Reform American Government to Make it More Democratic, Responsive and Honest**

- **Discussion Board posting/comment**