

**Political Science 3893: Research in American Politics: Building a Better Congress—Theory and Practice**  
**Spring 2016**  
**Prof. Alan E. Wiseman**

Tuesday: 12:25-2:55 PM  
349 Commons Center

Office: 336 Commons Center  
Office Hours: TTh, 9:15-10:15 AM, or by appointment  
Phone: (615) 322-6242  
Email: [alan.wiseman@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:alan.wiseman@vanderbilt.edu)

### **Course Overview**

This course introduces students to research in American politics, with a specific focus on the legislative effectiveness of individual members of the U.S. Congress. Under the guidance of Prof. Volden, students will conduct research into the lawmaking effectiveness of members of the U.S. Congress. This course is run in parallel with Prof. Alan Wiseman's course at Vanderbilt University. Building on Legislative Effectiveness Scores from Volden and Wiseman's prior research, groups of students will develop and test hypotheses about: (a) how to detect candidates who will be effective lawmakers, (b) how to cultivate effectiveness among existing lawmakers, and (c) when voters hold lawmakers accountable for their ineffectiveness.

### **Readings**

The following book can be purchased at the Vanderbilt University student bookstore. Additional readings will be made available on the class OAK site.

Volden, Craig, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2014. *Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress: The Lawmakers*. Cambridge University Press.

### **Course requirements and grading**

The course grade for PSCI 3893 will be derived from the class assignments, course participation, the group presentation, and the group research report.

The percentage distribution for each activity is as follows:

Class assignments	50 percent
Group presentation	10 percent
Final report	25 percent
Class participation	15 percent

In addition to completing each of these assignments (and engaging in class participation), all students will be required to complete a peer evaluation for each group assignment completed; and students' grades for their group assignments will be affected by their peers' evaluations of their respective contributions to the group effort(s).

### **Class Participation**

Effective participation includes preparation, class involvement, and anything else that advances the agenda of learning the course material for the class as a whole. Ineffective participation includes being unprepared for class, absence or consistent tardiness, working on unrelated material during class time, or any other behavior detrimental to the learning environment. Participation also involves completion of the course evaluation.

**Honor Code:** I expect all of the work you do in this course to be your own. I will tolerate absolutely no cheating or plagiarism (using someone else's words or ideas without proper citation). I will report any cases of cheating or plagiarism to the Vanderbilt Honor Council, and they will be handled according to university policy.

### **Course Outline**

#### **DETAILED CLASS SCHEDULE—SUBJECT TO SMALL CHANGES**

##### **SESSION 1: JANUARY 12**

Introduction to Course and to the Legislative Effectiveness Project

- Distribution of syllabus and discussion of areas of research inquiry

##### **SESSION 2: JANUARY 19**

**Background and Research Questions**

**Readings:**

- Volden and Wiseman (entire book)

**Assignment (5% of final grade):**

- Students generate three research questions ahead of class (placed within areas of (1) recruitment, (2) cultivation, or (3) accountability).

##### **SESSION 3: JANUARY 26**

**Research Scope and Hypothesis Development**

**Assignment (5% of final grade):**

- Students code each other's research questions from red to green, in regards to areas that are likely very difficult/impossible to investigate within a semester (red) to very straightforward to investigate (green).
- Within green (and perhaps yellow) areas, students generate three hypotheses.

**Accomplishment:**

- By end of class session, students will be formed into research groups, with tentative hypotheses for investigation.
- Students will learn how to identify relevant literatures.

**SESSION 4: FEBRUARY 2**

**Refined Hypotheses and Relevant Literatures**

**Assignment (5% of final grade):**

- Each group will identify ten readings from the relevant literature, in a document listing the full academic citation, the abstract (or brief summary, if no abstract is available), and a sentence on how the work will likely be relevant to the research hypotheses.

**Accomplishment:**

- By the end of class session, each group will have refined hypotheses and tentative reading lists.

**SESSION 5: FEBRUARY 9**

**Research Design and Research Schedule**

**Reading:**

- First half of student-generated reading list

**Assignment (5% of final grade):**

- One-page summary of each reading on list and its relevance for the research project. Each student will be responsible for one summary, made available to the rest of the class.

**Accomplishment:**

- By the end of class session, each group will have a schedule for their research through the rest of the semester to its final products.

**SESSION 6: FEBRUARY 16**

**Presentations from Virginia**

**Accomplishments:**

- Students from the University of Virginia will present their projects and findings, with students from Vanderbilt Q&A.

**SESSION 7: FEBRUARY 23****Gathering Quantitative and Qualitative Data****Reading:**

- Second half of student-generated reading list

**Assignment (5% of final grade):**

- One-page summary of each reading on list and its relevance for the research project. Each student will be responsible for one summary, made available to the rest of the class.
- Each student should identify *another* 1-3 readings from the relevant literature not already summarized by someone in the class.

**Accomplishment:**

- By the end of class session, each group will have a clear idea for the data they will gather over the next several weeks, and will begin to work on individual assignments.

**SESSION 8: MARCH 1****Refining Research Design****Assignment (5% of final grade):**

- Each group produces 3-5 page report on their refined hypotheses, links to literature, and research design.

**Accomplishments:**

- Troubleshooting for research design and data gathering moving smoothly forward.

**SESSION 9: MARCH 8****Spring Break – No Class Session Scheduled – Enjoy!****SESSION 10: MARCH 15****Data Gathering Issues**

**Assignments (5% of final grade):**

- One-page summary of each reading on refined list and its relevance for the research project. Each student will be responsible for one summary, made available to the rest of the class.
- Each student produces a 1-2 page summary of their data gathering activities, process, accomplishments, and problems.

**Accomplishments:**

- Class dedicated to basic understanding of data analysis techniques used in the Legislative Effectiveness Project.
- Troubleshooting for data gathering moving smoothly forward.

**SESSION 11: MARCH 22**

**Individual Group Troubleshooting I**

**Accomplishments:**

- Each group will meet individually with Prof. Wiseman to assess development of research and confront problems.

**SESSION 12: MARCH 29**

**Individual Group Troubleshooting II**

**Accomplishments:**

- Each group will meet individually with Prof. Wiseman to assess development of research and confront problems.

**SESSION 13: APRIL 5**

**Preliminary Reports and Presentations**

**Assignments (10% of final grade):**

- Each group turns in rough draft of preliminary research report, with sections on (1) introduction/background, (2) research question/thesis statement, (3) literature review/hypotheses, (4) research design/data gathering, (5) preliminary results, (6) implications and conclusions, (7) references, and (8) any technical appendices needed.
- In this class section, each group will present their findings to date to the class as a whole, and lay out the remaining steps.

**Accomplishments:**

- Class will offer feedback and suggestions on completion of research.

**SESSION 14: APRIL 12**

## **Penultimate Drafts**

### **Assignment:**

- Each group will turn in a completed full draft of research report (**5% of final grade**).

### **Accomplishments:**

- Students will work on their final presentations.

## **SESSION 15: APRIL 19**

### **Final Presentations to University of Virginia Students**

### **Assignment:**

- Groups will present their projects and findings, engaging each other in Q&A from myself, in addition to students and faculty at the University of Virginia (**10% of final grade**).

**\*\*\*FINAL GROUP REPORT (25% of final grade) DUE – TBD\*\*\***