Course description
Canada’s federal and provincial legislatures are supposed to be the centre-pieces of our democracy. Yet recently questions regarding the stability of minority governments, the use of prorogation, and the general need for parliamentary reform have become ongoing topics of debate. This course equips students to explore these issues by examining the role of Canada’s legislatures, how they operate, and what drives the behaviour of legislators. It begins by reviewing the functions of legislatures within a political system, and then explores how these tasks are achieved within the Westminster model. Canada’s parliamentary system is then analyzed, with particular attention being paid to procedure, party discipline, engagement with citizens, and the role of individual politicians. The course concludes with a discussion of potential institutional reforms. Due to time constraints, it focuses primarily on the federal Parliament, but devotes one class exclusively to the provincial and territorial legislatures and considers them wherever possible.

Course objectives
By the end of the course students will be familiar with different approaches to legislative studies; have a detailed understanding of the four functions of Westminster legislatures (government formation, representation, legislation, scrutiny); understand the role of parties in the legislature and concerns around excessive party discipline; be able to identify opportunities for influence by backbench legislators; know the strengths and weaknesses of provincial legislatures; be well versed in current debates over parliamentary reform.

Course Requirements

Course components
- Course participation 20%  Ongoing
- Book Review of “Tragedy in the Commons” 20%  Due Monday, July 21
- Presentation 20%  Due date varies
- Research Essay 10%  Due Monday, July 28
  - Proposal 10%  Due Monday, July 28
  - Final Essay 30%  Due Monday, August 11
Course readings and class plan

Primary texts
- Alison Loat and Michael Macmillan. 2014. *Tragedy in the Commons*. Toronto: Random House

The texts are available in the University of Toronto bookstore.

PART I – INTRODUCTION AND FUNCTIONS

Class 1 - An introduction to legislatures (Wednesday, July 2)

Questions:
- What are the functions of legislatures? Are they still relevant?
- Are legislatures in decline?
- What influence can legislatures have?
- How can we study legislatures?
- What are the differences between Westminster and Congressional legislatures?

Required readings


Recommended readings

Class 2: Making and breaking governments (Monday, July 7)

Questions
- How do legislatures form governments?
- What is the convention of responsible government?
- Does responsible government succeed in holding governments accountable?
- What problems does the system create?
- Is responsible government compatible with citizen’s expectations of democracy?
- What are conventions? How are they created and enforced?

Required readings


Recommended readings


Class 3: Representation (Wednesday, July 9)

Questions
- What are different conceptions of representation?
- Is the House of Commons representative of Canadians?
- How is representation affected by population and geography?
- Does the makeup of parliament shape the choices it makes?
- What kind of representation does the public expect?
Required readings


Recommended readings


Class 4: Legislative process and committees (Monday, July 14)
Questions
- What are the steps in the legislative process for government bills?
- What opportunities exist for input from MPs or the public?
- How do omnibus bills, time allocation, and closure affect the legislative process?
- Are filibusters acceptable democratic tools for both government and opposition?
- Do committees play a meaningful role in the development of legislation and policy?

Required readings


Class 5: Scrutiny and accountability (Wednesday, July 16)

Questions

- What is the doctrine of ministerial accountability?
- How does the size of a legislature affect the potential for scrutiny?
- What tools of scrutiny and accountability are available to legislators?
- Do the Officers of Parliament empower MPs or compete with them?
- What is the estimates process and how is it different from the budget?
- Do MPs have the tools they need to track government spending?

Required readings


Recommended readings

Class 6: Field trip/book discussion (Monday, July 21) – Book review due
- Field trip and/or discussion of *Tragedy in the Commons*

PART II – ACTORS IN THE LEGISLATURE

Class 7: Parliamentary parties (Wednesday, July 23)
Questions
- What functions do parties play in parliament?
- What powers does the Prime Minister have over parliament?
- Is party discipline too strong?
- Are there any benefits to MPs from party discipline?
- Should MPs follow their party line? If not, how do they decide?
- Would a Prime Minister who experiences a rebellion be seen as weak?
- Should there be an exception to party discipline for “conscience issues”?

Required readings


Recommended readings


**Class 8: Backbench legislators (Monday, July 28) – Essay proposal due**

Questions

- Should MPs have a job description?
- Is constituency work an important task for an MP?
- Is “free-lancing” by MPs a sign of initiative or weakness?
- Does private member’s business allow MPs to shape legislative outcomes?
- Does caucus provide a meaningful tool for MPs to influence party decisions?
- Do MPs have the resources to perform their duties?

**Required readings**


**Recommended readings**


*Note – Final date to drop without penalty is July 29, 2014*
PART III – INSTITUTIONS AND REFORM

Class 9: Territorial and Provincial Legislatures (Wed., July 30)

Questions
- How do the provincial and territorial legislatures compare with the federal parliament in terms of their capacity to perform the four legislative functions?
- How does the non-partisan system in Nunavut and the NWT operate?
- How does the pattern of one-party dominance affect some assemblies?
- What challenges are created by the smaller size of provincial assemblies?
- Do the provincial and territorial assemblies have sufficient resources?

Required readings


Recommended readings

Holiday: Monday, August 4 – No class
Class 10: The Senate (Wednesday, August 6)

Questions

- What roles is the Senate believed to play within the Canadian political system?
- How does the Senate contribute to the four functions of the Canadian Parliament?
- Does the Senate complement or compete with the House of Commons?
- What are the perceived strengths of the Senate?
- What are the primary concerns with the Senate?
- How can Senate reform occur?
- What proposals have been put forward for Senate Reform?
- How might Senate reform affect the operation of Parliament and Canadian politics?

Required readings


Recommended readings


Class 11: Parliamentary Reform (Monday, August 11)
Questions
- What ideas for parliamentary reform have been proposed for each of the four functions of the legislature?
- What reforms have been proposed for the operation of parliamentary parties?
- How would these reforms affect backbench legislators?
- Is reform of institutions sufficient, or is a cultural change required?
- What reforms are required at the provincial and territorial level?
- Will Canadians accept a political system that is less predictable?

Required readings
*Review reform suggestions from Tragedy in the Commons


Recommended readings