

POSC 308/408: The American Presidency

Spring, 2015 Syllabus

January 2, 2014

Professor Joseph White

MWF 2:00 – 2:50

Mather Memorial 225

Mather House 113. Office Hours 10:30 – Noon MW

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Our Topic

This course will study the most puzzling institution in American government.

The first puzzle involves defining the institution: the *puzzle of presidents and the presidency*. At any time there is only one president, and for some the presidency means the individuals who hold the office. So we speak of the Bush 43 Presidency, or the Obama Presidency, or Reagan Presidency. Yet the presidency is also a bundle of powers and responsibilities, within a system of “separated institutions sharing powers.” And these powers and responsibilities are not simply exercised by an individual called the president. So the presidency is also a set of organizations, sometimes called the “presidential branch” of government. It includes bureaucracies, such as the Office of Management and Budget and the National Security Council, that work directly for the president and, in theory, to help whoever holds the office manage relationships with Congress, the federal agencies, the public, and other forces that influence what government does. Hence we cannot understand the presidency without thinking about the set of powers, the organizations, and the person – but those are also quite different topics.

The second puzzle involves what the presidency (whatever that means) can do and is expected to do: the *puzzle of presidential power*. Many observers argue there is a mismatch between the role that both the public and presidents appear to expect presidents to play in American government, and the quite limited powers that were established by the constitutional design. The president’s role in government far exceeds what could be expected from reading the constitution or *The Federalist Papers*. The president is also blamed for events over which he (so far it has been a he) has little control. Why? So what are the sources of both power of and demands on the presidency? What are the extent and limits of presidential power, and how do they expand or (if unlucky and unskillful) reduce their influence?

Third is the *puzzle of greatness or failure*. Why does public opinion or the "judgment of history" favor some presidents and not others? Are some presidents "great" or is greatness thrust upon them by circumstances? To put this another way, to what extent do presidents control how well they do, or do the conditions of the time dominate presidential performance? How can we tell?

We will explore these questions while recognizing that, as is usual in the study of politics and government, we can only gain knowledge and wisdom, not absolute truth. One reason is, the objects we study change. The presidency – in its various forms – changes with its inhabitants and with its environment.

The learning objectives of this course therefore are for students to better understand:

- * The different dimensions of the presidency;
- * The challenges and opportunities faced by the president in office at any given time; and
- * How the presidency fits into the broader structure of U.S. government and politics.

Put another way, I'd be thrilled if students emerged from the class able to look at a presidency and understand in what dimensions it is succeeding or failing; to what extent the success or failure is due to the president's own choices and if so to which choices; and to what extent any president under the conditions of the time might hope to do better.

Class Procedures and Assignments

Reading and Participation in Discussion

We will proceed, mainly, by reading analyses and discussing them. I will also add lectures either to introduce a broad topic or if I have a well-developed view that differs somewhat from the readings. The class discussion and lectures will be part of the material students are expected to be able to use for the written assignments, so as usual attending should help students earn better grades than if they do not attend. Students are expected (and welcome, and urged!) to participate and share their ideas and reactions to the ideas and evidence that the reading or I present. You are asked to let me know in advance if you will not be able to attend, and I understand that there are *occasional* conflicts.

Any book or article has something to say. Maybe lots of different things. These can be viewed as *propositions*, such as "presidential power is the power to persuade," or, "the growth of the White House staff since FDR has been both a boon and a bane to

presidents." Your understanding of the presidency will also consist of propositions, and the thinking behind those statements. What, for example, does it mean to say "presidential power is the power to persuade?" Aren't there other forms of power? Who do presidents need to persuade, about what, and why would anyone listen? Or, how could having more staff be a "bane" – isn't that sort of like having more troops? What general would not want more troops?

In early classes, I will identify propositions from each reading. Beginning third week of class, on most days I will ask one or two students to prepare two propositions and start discussion about them. I expect to ask each student to do that twice.

Participation, including the discussion propositions, will count for 10% of the grade in both POSC 308 and POSC 408. I understand that some people are less outgoing than others, so particularly quiet students will not get a lower grade as a result. However, students who have a lot to say, so long as it has some connection to the class material, can benefit from that. Participation would only lower the overall grade if a student misses more than 8 classes without approved explanation, does not prepare propositions, or disrupts the class. Good participation could raise the final grade.

Writing Assignments.

The written assignments for this class will consist of five moderate-length essays, designed to challenge students to reflect on the class material and integrate it into understandings of the modern presidency. This will include **four take-home essay exams during the term**, each focusing on one dimension of the presidency. They will be **due on February 9, March 2, April 3 and April 20**. For each I will hand out the question at the end of the previous class. Essays should be **about 1500 – 2000 words**.

Instead of a final exam, **the final written assignment will be an essay due on May 5 at Noon**. Students will apply their understanding of the course material to reflect on the analysis of events during a presidency as reported in one book. I have ordered one book to be the default that most students may choose to use, but students who want to use a different book can propose it to me and I may say that's OK. The default book for the final assignment is **Jonathan Alter's *The Center Holds***, which focuses on the Obama administration in 2011-2012, so a period of gridlock (at best) with Congress but also a successful re-election. **The assignment is to write an essay which considers how the book's story fits with the rest of the course material**. For example, what does the book's story suggest about topics such as presidential elections, organization of the White

House, ability to control the executive branch, and ability to influence Congress? What does it suggest about the effects of the president himself, the relationships between presidents and their presidencies, the sources and extent of presidential power, and the extent to which presidents control events or are controlled by their situations? This essay should be **about 2000 -2500 words**.

Extra Assignment for POSC 483 students

The regulations of the College of Arts and Sciences require that, when a class is offered at both 300- and 400-levels, the 400-level version require some extra work. POSC 408 students will therefore be required to write one further paper. The date and topic will be worked out in consultation with the students. It is highly likely to be in the first half of the class, and related to the material on “Presidents and the Executive Branch.”

Grades Will Be Calculated as Follows

For POSC 308, each of the five essays will be worth 18%, so a total of 90% of the grade. Participation will count for 10% of the grade.

For POSC 408, each written assignment will count for 15% of the grade, for a total of 90%. Participation will count for 10% of the grade.

Classroom Procedures and Academic Integrity

I prefer that students arrive on time. I understand that this is sometimes difficult, particularly if you have a class immediately previous on the other side of campus. If that is your situation, please let me know (and tell me which class it is). I will note lateness in my attendance records, and systematic lateness, without a good excuse, will be noted as part of the participation grade.

I expect students’ work to be their own. Plagiarism in any form is punishable by a failing grade on the assignment in question and further penalty on the overall grade; and I may initiate university disciplinary proceedings.

I expect students to submit the essays on time. This is especially important because we will discuss them on the days on which they are due, which means that if you do not submit the essay in time I will expect you to skip the class. I expect to reduce grades by

half a grade for each day that an assignment is late. I will make exceptions if given a good (and documented) reason.

Cellphones and other electronic devices, other than laptops, should not be used in class. I hope discussion will be courteous and all contributions will be respected by all of us.

Readings other than the books listed below will be available on the course blackboard site. In some cases I will print and distribute them.

Books to Purchase or Otherwise Legally Obtain

Jonathan Alter, *The Center Holds: Obama and His Enemies*. Simon & Schuster, 2014.

George C. Edwards III, *The Strategic President: Persuasion & Opportunity in Presidential Leadership*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

Barton Gellman, *Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency*. Penguin Books, 2009.

John Sides and Lynn Vavreck, *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election*. Princeton University Press, 2013.

Stephen Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal*. 2nd ed. University Press of Kansas, 2011.

Schedule of Discussions, Readings, and Assignments

Jan 12 Introduction to class and each other.
Discussion: how do you rate presidents?

Part I: Overviews

Jan 14 James P. Pfiffner, "President: Governing." From *The Oxford Companion to American Politics*. 11 pp.
Pfiffner, "The Presidency: Origins and Powers." Chapter 1 in *The Modern Presidency* 6th ed. (Wadsworth/Cengage, 2011), pp. 1-17.

Jan 16 David Remnick, "Going the Distance: On and off the road with Barack Obama." *The New Yorker*, 1/27/14.

Jan 19: No Class, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday

- Jan 21:** Charles O. Jones, "Perspectives on the Presidency," from Jones, *The Presidency in a Separated System 2nd ed.* (Brookings, 2005), pp. 1-34.
Ryan Lizza, "The Obama Memos: The making of a post-post-partisan Presidency." *The New Yorker*, 1/30/12.
- Jan 23:** Scott C. James, "The Evolution of the Presidency: Between the Promise and the Fear," Chapter 3 in Joel D. Aberbach and Mark A. Peterson eds., *The Executive Branch* (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 3-40.
Gene Healy, "The Cult of the Presidency," *Reason*, June 2008
- Jan 26:** Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time*, Preface and Chapter 1, pp. ix-xii, 1-26, 195-198,

Part II: Selecting the President

- Jan 28:** Probably a Guest Instructor
Sides and Vavreck, *The Gamble*. "Preface to the Paperback Edition" and "Foreword," pp. xiii – xx. Chapters 1-2, pp. 1-31, 243-248, 273-276.
- Jan 30:** *The Gamble*, Chapters 3-4, pp. 32-96, 248-254, 276-289.
John Aldrich, "The Invisible Primary and Its Effects on Democratic Choice," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, January 2009, 33-38.
- Feb 2:** *The Gamble*, Chapters 5-6, pp. 97-173, 254-259, 289-309.
- Feb 4:** *The Gamble*, Chapter 7, pp. 174-225, 259-272, 309-318.
- Feb 6:** *The Gamble*, Chapter 8, pp. 226-242, 318-321
Robert A. Dahl, "Myth of the Presidential Mandate," *Political Science Quarterly* 1990, pp. 355-372.
- Feb 9:** *First take-Home essay is due by e-mail by 11 a.m. We will discuss them in class.*

Part III: Presidents and the Executive Branch

- Feb 11:** Andrew Rudalevige, "The President and Unilateral Power: A Taxonomy." Chapter 17 in Michael Nelson ed., *The Presidency and the Political System 10th ed.* (CQ Press 2014), pp. 473-499.
- Feb 13:** David E. Lewis, excerpts from *The Politics of Presidential Appointments* (Princeton, 2008). Chapters 1-2, pp. 1-50, 221-236.
- Feb 16:** Guest Instructor: Jonathan Entin J.D., David L. Brennan Professor and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, CWRU School of Law, and Professor of Political Science.
Elena Kagan, "Presidential Administration," *Harvard Law Review* 114 (2000-2001). Introduction, Part I, and Part II, pp. 2246 – 2281.
- Feb 18:** No class, Professor White must attend a conference.
- Feb 20:** Robert V. Percival, "Who's in Charge? Does the President Have Directive Authority over Agency Regulatory Decisions?" *Fordham Law Review* 79 (2011), pp. 2487 – 2540)
- Feb 23:** Richard M. Pious, "Obama's Use of Prerogative Powers in the War on Terrorism," Chapter 16 James A. Thurber ed., *Obama in Office*. (Paradigm Publishers, 2011) pp. 255-68.
- Feb 25:** James Pfiffner, "The President and National Security," Chapter 6 in *The Modern Presidency 6th ed.*, 186-229.
- Feb 27** David E. Lewis, "Learning the Lessons of Politicization," Chapter 8 of *The Politics of Presidential Appointments*, pp. 201-219, 263-264. Motoko Rich, "'No Child' Law Whittled Down by White House," *New York Times* 7/6/12; Martha Derthick and Andy Rotherham, "Obama's NCLB Waivers: Are they necessary or illegal?" *Education Next* 12(2), Spring 2012.
- Mar 2:** *Second take-home essay is due by e-mail by 11 a.m. We will discuss them in class.*

Part IV: Leading Beyond the Executive Branch: Persuasion and Maneuver

Mar 4: Andrew Rudalevige, "The Executive Branch and the Legislative Process," Chapter 13 in Aberbach and Peterson eds., *The Executive Branch*, pp. 419-451.

Mar 6: Richard Neustadt, excerpts from *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. (The Free Press, 1990). Chapters 1 and 3, pp. 3-9, 29-48 and "Preface to the 1990 edition," pp. ix – xix. In that order!

March 9 – 13: Spring Break

Mar 16: Edwards, *The Strategic President*, Preface and Chapter 2 1-2, pp. ix – 60, 200-212.

Mar 18: Edwards, *The Strategic President*, Chapter 3, pp. 61-109, 213-230;

Mar 20: Edwards, *The Strategic President*, Chapters 4-5 on "Leading Congress," pp. 110-187, 230-244.

Mar 23: The Master, in another world: excerpts from Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power* (Knopf, 2012) on passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, pp. 427-436, 452-465, 475-499, 545-570.

Mar 25: Edwards, *The Strategic President*, Chapter 6, pp. 188-200, 244-47.

Mar 27: Duane Oldfield and Aaron Wildavsky, "Reconsidering the Two Presidencies," *Society*, July/August 1989, pp. 54-59.
John B. Gilmour, "Political Theater or Bargaining Failure: Why Presidents Veto." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41(3), Sept. 2011, pp. 471-487.

Mar 30: Mark J. Oleszek and Walter J. Oleszek, "Congress and President Obama: A Perspective," Chapter 13 in James A. Thurber ed., *Rivals for Power: Presidential-Congressional Relations 5th ed.* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), pp. 259-292.

Apr 1: Joseph White, "Presidents, Congress, and Budget Decisions." Chapter 9 in Thurber ed., *Rivals for Power 5th ed.*, pp. 179-200.

Apr 3: Third take-home essay is due by e-mail by 11 a.m. We will discuss them in class.

Part V: Power and Advice Inside the White House

Apr 6: Richard Neustadt, Chapters 11-12 of *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*: (on Carter and Reagan), pp. 230-294.

Apr 8: James P. Pfiffner, "Organizing the Twenty-First Century White House," Chapter 4 in Thurber ed., *Rivals for Power*, pp. 63-86.

Apr 10: David B. Cohen, Karen M. Hult and Charles E. Walcott, "The Chicago Clan: The Chiefs of Staff in the Obama White House," *Social Science Quarterly* 93(5), Dec 2012, 1101-1126.
Peter A. Baker and Mark Mazetti, "Brennan Draws on Bond With Obama in Backing CIA." *New York Times*, 12/14/14.

Apr 13: Gellman, *Angler*, Chapters 1-5, pp. 1-130

Apr 15: Gellman, *Angler*, Chapters 6-10, pp. 131-276

Apr 17: Gellman, *Angler*, Chapters 11-14, pp. 277-395.

Apr 20: Fourth take-home essay due by e-mail by 11 a.m. We will discuss them in class. Please note that this essay will focus to some extent on *Angler*, so provide me a chance to give feedback that might be useful for the final assignment.

Part VI: The Conditions That Shape Presidencies

Apr 22: Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time*, Chapter 2, pp. 27-78 plus endnotes.

Apr 24: Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time*, Chapters 3-4, pp. 79-149, plus endnotes.

Apr 27: Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time*, Chapters 5-6, pp. 117-194, plus endnotes

Final Essay Assignment due by e-mail to Professor White at Noon on May 5.