POSC 308/408: The American Presidency  
Fall, 2011 Syllabus as of August 24, 2011  
Professors Justin Buchler and Joseph White  
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Mondays and Wednesdays, 12:30 – 1:45 pm  
Mandel Center 105

Faculty Contact Information
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Description
This course will study the most puzzling institution in American government. It is puzzling first because 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. Why? But the president is also blamed for events over which he (so far it has been a he) has little control. Why? In short, there is a puzzle of presidential power. What are its sources, what are its extent and limits, and to what extent can presidents expand or (if unlucky and unskillful) reduce their influence?

The second puzzle involves what we mean by “the presidency.” There are at least three levels. One is the presidency as an institution, a bundle of powers and responsibilities, within a system of “separated institutions sharing powers.” One is the presidency as a set of organizations, sometimes called the “presidential branch” of government. The presidential branch is very different from the executive 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. The third level of the presidency is the individuals who hold the office. Their psychology and skills have major effects on how the presidency influences American government at any point in time. 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.
Class Structure
The course will meet two times a week. It will be a very unusual course, for the political science department, because it will be team-taught. Professor Buchler will take the lead on topics in which he is especially expert, such as elections. Professor White will take the lead on topics that are central to his work, such as budgeting and the relationship between the president or presidential branch and the wider executive branch. And both of us will contribute on other topics.

The course will also mix lecture and discussion formats. Lectures will focus on particular aspects of the presidency on which we wish to present specific arguments. In other cases, where readings investigate a topic at some depth, the class will be conducted more as a seminar to investigate the readings. That will especially be the case as we discuss some highly influential books or articles about the presidency, which make arguments that have been central to subsequent analysis by political scientists and journalists.

Assignments and Grading

In addition to the midterm and final, students will apply what they are learning about the presidency and its challenges to a case study of one particular decision. They can choose either a decision made by President Bill Clinton or a decision made by President George W. Bush.

Greenstein’s *The Presidential Difference* discusses both presidencies, and students may look to that text for broad guidance on the major policy decisions of each president. However, the papers themselves will require additional research. Students should consider resources such as *Congressional Quarterly* and *National Journal* archives (both of which are available as databases on the Kelvin Smith Library website) as well as academic sources to provide historical context. The paper should have three sections: (1) a description of the substantive and political challenge and choice facing the president in question; (2) a summary of what he did, and (3) an argument about whether or not his choices were appropriate, and why. Your analysis in the final section must be based centrally on concepts from course readings. The paper should be about 2500 words (10 pages) long. However, grades will depend on the quality of the analysis rather than the length. Students registered for POSC 408 will be required to write a paper that analyzes in greater depth; it should be 3500 to 4000 words. The latter students should consult with the instructors to work out expectations for their topic and paper.

In the course of your analysis, feel free to consider how a policy decision affected the president’s reelection prospects, the legislative process, or the executive branch. You
should express some of the relative merits or demerits of alternative courses of action. However, papers should focus on the strategic merits of the decision rather than the normative implications of the decision.

We encourage you to meet with one or both of us to discuss what presidential decision you will study. A short statement of the decision (e.g. what the issue was, what the decision was, and when it was made) will be due in class no later than October 19.

In addition to the paper, the course will also have midterm and final exams, both on a take-home basis. A portion of the grade will also be based on classroom participation, which includes being prepared to answer questions if we ask you during class, and the discussion questions you will be submitting before some class sessions (as described below). The grading formula for both POSC 308 and POSC 408 will be:

- Participation: 10%
- Midterm: 25%
- Paper: 30%
- Final Exam: 35%

**Classroom procedures**

Attendance is mandatory. Each student shall be permitted to miss four sessions. Each absence beyond four will result in a two percentage point deduction from the student’s overall course grade. Exceptions may be made, but only under extraordinary circumstances.

We also request that students show up on time for class. Students may show up late once, but each late attendance beyond that will result in a one percentage point deduction from the overall course grade. If you have an issue due to having an immediately preceding class far across campus, you should inform us and we will consult with the instructor of the other class to see if any adjustment can be worked out – such as that professor understanding that you need to depart at 12:20 and no later.

The course will contain a mix of lecture and seminar components. Either on the syllabus or in advance, we will inform you if a class is scheduled to be a formal seminar. For these classes the procedure will be as follows. Each student will attend the session with a discussion question or comment raised by the readings. The class will then respond to the question or comment until the discussion reaches an obvious end-point. Then, we will move on to the next student’s question or comment, and the process will repeat until
each student has had the opportunity to raise a question or comment.

Throughout the course, we will address controversial topics about which many people have strong feelings. However, our objective is to cover the topics from a dispassionate perspective, and we ask that students approach the material with intellectual curiosity rather than with the intention of expressing opinions about whether presidential decisions are right or wrong from a moral, ethical or ideological perspective. We ourselves find it rather easy to be critical of any president; but it is a very tough job and easier to critique than to do!

We encourage students to bring laptops to class with the provision that any student with a laptop out may be instructed, at any time, to follow up on a point raised in class by looking up important facts that neither of the professors can recall immediately. So, only bring a laptop if you are prepared to use it to facilitate class activities rather than as a distraction. Cell phones, blackberries, iphones and other unnamed gizmos, though, may not be used, and should be turned off before class begins.

**Schedule of Discussions, Readings, and Assignments**


The following books are assigned in their entirety, and available from the university bookstore:

Readings which are available directly online or from the university library will be listed with those links or the journal title and issue. Readings that are copies of chapters from books will be available from the library e-reserves. Some other readings will be made available on the class blackboard site. If not otherwise specified, a reading should be found on the e-reserves.
August 29
First class meeting. Discussion of goals of the course and of what the students expect from a president. Who are the good or “great” presidents? Why? What makes a “failed presidency”? What do you expect a president to do?

Part I: The President and Presidency in a Separated System

August 31  System Perspectives (1)
Lecture by Professor White on the Puzzle of Presidential Power.

September 5  No class: Labor Day Holiday

September 7  System Perspectives (2)
Scott C. James, “The Evolution of the Presidency: Between the Promise and the Fear” (pp 3-40 of A&P)

September 12  Presidents (1)
Read: Greenstein
NOTE: The 9/12 and 9/14 sessions will be seminar sessions. Students should attend these sessions with discussion questions or comments prepared.

September 14  Presidents (2)
Discussion of Greenstein continues
Continuation of seminar

September 19  Constitutional Powers
The Constitution of the United States Articles I and II and the 12th, 14th, 15th, 19th, 20th, 22nd, 24th, 25th, and 26th amendments. Available with useful explanation at http://www senate.gov/civics/constitution_item/constitution.htm#a1
The Federalist Papers numbers 69 and 70, downloadable from http://www.law.ou.edu/hist/federalist/
Part II: Presidents and the Public

September 21  Communication in One Direction
Lawrence R. Jacobs, “Communicating from the White House: Presidential Narrowcasting and the National Interest” (A&P)
Scott Lilly, “Communication is Destiny” (Obama)

September 26  Choosing the President: The Nomination Process

September 28  Nominations Continued
NOTE: A portion of the 9/28 session will be seminar-based, so students should attend that session with questions or comments prepared.

October 3  Choosing the President: The General Election
Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich and David W. Rohde, Chapters 2 and 3 from Change and Continuity in the 2008 and 2010 Elections, pp. 38-79.

October 5  General Election Continued
NOTE: A portion of the 10/5 session will be seminar-based, so students should attend that session with questions or comments prepared.
October 10  What the Choice Means

**Take-Home Exam Distributed**

October 12: TAKE-HOME EXAM DUE

**Part III: Presidents in Cooperation and Conflict**

October 17  President as Legislator (1)
Mark J. Oleszek and Walter J. Oleszek, “Congress and the President: ‘Yes We Can!’ or ‘Can We?’”. *Rivals* pp. 251-284
Joseph White ms. on prospects for President George W. Bush’s domestic agenda.

October 19  President as Legislator, 2009-10

**Students Must Choose Topics for Their Paper By Today**

October 26  A Classic Analysis – Persuasion, Bargaining, Trading
Read: Neustadt

**NOTE:** The 10/26 and 10/31 sessions will be seminar sessions. Students should attend these sessions with discussion questions or comments prepared

October 31  Continued Discussion of Neustadt
Continuation of seminar

November 2  Conditions for Legislative Success and Failure
Richard Fleischer and Jon R. Bond, “Partisanship and the President’s Quest for Votes on the Floor of Congress.” *Polarized Politics* pp. 154-185.

November 7  The role of presidential popularity and the rally effect
Read: Richard A. Brody, *Assessing the President*, Chapters 1, 3 and 5.
November 9  Executive Powers: Appointments and Orders  

November 14  Executive Powers – Directing Agency Decisions  
http://www.fordhamlawreview.org/assets/pdfs/Vol_79/Percival_May.pdf  
Executive Order 13563, January 18, 2011 (3pp.)  
NOTE: The 11/14 class will be a seminar session. Students should attend this class with discussion questions or comments prepared.

November 16  Executive Power: The special case of foreign policy?  

November 21  The Politics of Divided Government  
Read: David R. Mayhew, Divided We Govern, Chapters 1, 4, 5, 6.

November 23  Optional Class due to Thanksgiving Holiday

November 28  The President and the Executive Office  
NOTE: The 11/28 class will be a seminar session. Students should attend this class with discussion questions or comments prepared.

November 30  The President and Advice  
**December 5** Presidents, the Bureaucracy, and Congress: The Budget

**December 7** Presidents, the Bureaucracy, and Congress: The Budget (2)
Joseph White, “From Ambition to Desperation on the Budget,” *Obama* Chapter 11, pp. 183-198

**Strategic Choices Paper Due December 9**
Papers will be available, graded, by 5 pm on December 14.

The final exam time slot is December 20 at 8:30 a.m. We prefer to do a take-home exam, and the class will discuss the best time for the exam. The exam will be distributed at the time chosen, and will be due 24 hours later.