Political Science 408:  
The American Presidency  
Spring 2018

**Lecture:** Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:00-12:15, Social Sciences 5231  
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**Overview**

This is a course about a peculiar American political institution, the Presidency. Throughout the course, we will focus on four fundamental questions about the President’s role as formal head of the executive branch of government and head of state, but also as the focal point of public attention:

1. **What are the sources of presidential power?** In Harry Truman’s formulation, presidential power is little more than convincing other people that what the president wants from them is in fact what they should want in order to further their own interests. The president sits atop a vast bureaucracy, filled with actors whose interests will not always coincide with his. The president must continually bargain with members of Congress, each of whom has his or her own independent base of political support. And, as every president learns, public evaluations can be fickle.

   On the other hand, presidents retain substantial amount of statutory and constitutional authority, and there is little doubt about the president’s ability to act almost at will with respect to war powers and foreign affairs. We will investigate the importance of these formal and informal sources of presidential power, and devote considerable attention to the historical development of presidential power, examining key presidencies and eras in close detail.

   Many constitutional grants are ambiguous, or have never been definitively interpreted. Further, some questions of presidential power are actually impossible to answer. We will consider one of the contradictions of the office—the existence of the prerogative power, or the inherent authority to go outside the Constitution (or even violate it) in order to achieve a higher goal, such as saving the Republic.

2. **How are presidents elected?** The presidential election process is long, complex, and difficult to navigate (and it does not always produce what most people think are particularly strong candidates). Critics contend that the process is flawed, because presidential campaign skills have little to do with presidential governing skills. Some observers maintain that the election process deters quality leaders from seeking the office; historian James Bryce made the same argument in 1888. We will investigate presidential primaries, the
politics of getting to the convention, the general election campaign, and the relationship between the politics of campaigning and the politics of governance.

We will pay close attention to the 2016 election, given how unconventional it was. Most of the time, presidents emerge from existing political networks and have links to networks of social elites. There are some who did not, but Trump is the first president to have no previous government or military experience.

3. How do presidents govern? This may seem like an obvious question, but it is perhaps the key question about presidential behavior. Every modern president has tried to use campaign-type techniques to generate support for their legislative initiatives. It rarely works, in part because the two tasks—campaigning and governing—are so different. Can you recall an instance where a president overcame congressional or public opposition by making public appeals? Bush attempted this with Social Security reform, with dismal results. Obama did the same with gun control, using the families of the children murdered in Newtown, CT to push Congress to enact new gun control legislation. Nothing happened, as even a mild change to background checks could not overcome a Senate filibuster.

4. How do Presidents make policy? Different presidents have different policy goals; how successful are they in implementing their ideas of government? Here we will pay particular attention to the relationship between the President and Congress, and the manner in which the White House manages public relations.

Learning Goals

Students will develop a critical understanding of:

- The historical, constitutional, and political basis of presidential power.
- The way presidents are elected, and how the 2016 election challenged traditional notions.
- How presidents turn their campaign promises into public policy through a complex set of relations with their own staff, the public, the media, and the other branches of government.

Credits

This course is for four credits. The class will meet for two 75-minute class periods each week over the spring semester and carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities (reading, writing, studying, etc) for about three hours out of classroom for every class period.
Assignments and Grading

- Two midterms (20 percent each)
  - March 1st
  - April 12
- Final exam (35 percent)
  - May 7
- Section attendance and participation (15 percent)
- Written assignments (10 percent)
  - Each student will submit two assignments

Anything covered in lecture, discussion section, or readings is fair game for the exams.

Course Resources

There are four required books for the course:


They are available at the University Bookstore, but feel free to purchase them (or rent them) wherever you find a good deal.

The rest of the readings will be posted on Learn@UW or easily available online.

The reading load is moderate to heavy, and at times the assignments can be demanding. It is important that you stay current, because I guarantee that you will not be able to reel everything in two days before the exams.

Some websites that will be useful for this class are:

- The White House
- The Miller Center for Public Affairs, University of Virginia
- The American Presidency Project, UC Santa Barbara
- The White House Transition Project
- National Archives Presidential Documents Guide
Academic Integrity

I have zero tolerance for any instance of cheating on an exam or any other academic misconduct. Please review UW-Madison policy and procedure for academic misconduct. If you cheat, the least I will do is fail you.

Disabilities

I will make every effort to accommodate students with disabilities or special needs. Please get in contact with me as soon as possible to make arrangements if you have a special need. Information about students will be limited to a need to know basis and your confidentiality will be guarded as much as possible. For more information on University policy and procedures, contact the McBurney Disability Resource Center, 1305 Linden Drive, (608) 263-2741.

Schedule

Introduction—Studying the Presidency and the Nature of the Office

Overview

- Edwards, Mayer, and Wayne, chapter 1
- Miroff, “Introduction”
- Ragsdale, “Studying the Presidency: Why Presidents Need Political Scientists,” The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 2
- The American Presidency Project

Constitutional Origins and Historical Development

- Mackenzie, chapters 1 and 2
- Jeffrey Tulis, “The Two Constitutional Presidencies,” The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 1

Readings marked by asterisks are posted on Learn@UW.
• Stephen Skowronek, “The Development of Presidential Power,” *The Presidency and the Political System*, chapter 3

• Marc Landy and Sidney M. Milkis, “The Presidency in History,” *The Presidency and the Political System*, chapter 4

• Primary documents:
  – *Federalist* 67, 70, 71, and 72*
  – Joseph Story, *Commentaries on the Constitution*, sections 1485–1486*
  – George Washington Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789*

The Politics of Presidential Elections

Overview

• Mackenzie, chapter 3

Nominations and Presidential Primaries

• Edwards, Mayer, and Wayne, chapter 3


The General Election and the Electoral College


• Nate Silver, “There Is No ‘Blue Wall’,” *FivethirtyEight.Com*, May 12, 2015

The 2016 Election

• Pre-election readings:

• Post-election readings:

John Sides, “Five Key lessons from Donald Trump’s Surprising Victory,” The Washington Post’s The Monkey Cage, November 9, 2016


Is this the Way to Pick a President?

- James Bryce, “Why Great Men are Not Chosen President,” chapter 8 in The American Commonwealth (originally published 1888)

Presidential Governing—Managing the Affairs of State, and Getting What You Want

Campaigning Is Not Governing


- The White House Transition Project

- Crisis in the Fiery Cross Reef (video available)

The President and the Public and the Media; the Rise of the “Public Presidency”

- Edwards, Mayer, and Wayne, chapters 6 and 7

- Miroff, chapter 1

- Mackenzie, chapter 4

- Elvin Lim, “The Presidency and the Media: Two Faces of Democracy,” The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 10
• **Exercise:** You will select a Trump speech and analyze it to identify
  
  (1) The president’s goals and intended audience
  
  (2) Whether it moved the public and/or achieved the goals you identified in (1)

  Detailed information will be provided the week before the exercise.

**The Presidency as an Institution**

- Edwards, Mayer, and Wayne, chapter 8

**Decision Making in the White House**

- Edwards, Mayer, and Wayne, chapter 9

- **Exercise:** How would you characterize President Trump’s White House decision making and organizational structure? How is it consistent with what previous presidents have done, and how does it depart? Use a case study of a presidential decision or problem to evaluate whether these structures are effective in pursuing presidential goals.

  Detailed information will be provided the week before the exercise.

**Government in a Separated System: Relations with Other Governmental Actors**

**Energy in the Executive: the Question of the Initiative, from Unilateral Action to the Prerogative**

- Miroff, chapter 3

**Relations with Congress and the Separation of Powers**

- Edwards, Mayer, and Wayne, chapter 11
- Mackenzie, chapter 5
• Matthew Dickinson, “The President and Congress,” The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 15

Relations with the Judiciary

• Edwards, Mayer, and Wayne, chapter 12
• David Yalof, “The President and the Judiciary,” The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 16

The President as Head of the Executive Branch

• David Lewis and Terry Moe, “The President and the Bureaucracy,” The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 14

• Exercise: You will simulate a presidential advisor. Your assignment is to review the news over a specified date range (the dates will be provided), and write up a three- or four-page summary of the news, and then a one-page summary of the summary, which the president will rely on to know what is going on in the country and the world. You will submit both documents.

  Detailed information will be provided the week before the exercise.

Public Policies

Domestic and Economic Policy

• Edwards, Mayer, and Wayne, chapter 13
• Miroff, chapters 2 and 4

Foreign Policy and War Powers

• Edwards, Mayer, and Wayne, chapter 14
• Mackenzie, chapter 6
• Miroff, chapter 5
• Andrew Polsky, “The Presidency at War: the Window of Agency in Wartime Presidential Leadership,” The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 19
Summary

Asserting Presidential Leadership

- Paul Quirk, “Presidential Competence,” The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 5
- Miroff, “Conclusion”
- Mackenzie, chapter 7