The American Presidency

Course Description
There is no such thing as a bad time to study the American presidency. But some times (now, for instance) are better than others. Consider the following:

With just one year left of his time in office, Obama has been freed of many constraints that have limited his willingness to take significant risks. Because he doesn’t have to worry about reelection, he can talk about as he likes, engage as he likes, prioritize as he likes.

The 2016 presidential election has officially started, with the first primaries and caucuses only weeks away (the Iowa caucuses are on February 1st; the New Hampshire primary on February 9th). The Democratic primary process seems clear enough, pitting an overwhelming “establishment” favorite (Clinton) against an upstart yet surprisingly resilient liberal challenger (Sanders). The question here is not so much whether Sanders will actually be able to win (vanishingly unlikely, although that’s what people were saying about Obama in December 2007), but whether he will be able to pull Clinton far enough to the left to affect her general election chances.

The Republican process is an entirely different matter. Yowza. At one point there were 16 formally declared candidates, and even though a few have dropped out (Walker, Jindal, Graham, Perry, Pataki) eleven are still running. It is impossible – to put it mildly – to work out the dynamics of such a race (formal models become unstable with 3 candidates, and the complexity increases geometrically as you add more possibilities. Eleven candidates? Impossible). The “establishment” candidates are all tanking, with early favorite Jeb Bush barely registering, and now in 5th place, pulling 4.7% in the Real Clear Politics average. Most of the other candidates are more or less on the bottom (Fiorina, Santorum, Huckabee, Paul, Kasich). Neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson has dropped from his 2nd place status to 4th (and is in real trouble, as the dissention in his campaign signifies). Two other candidates, Texas Senator Ted Cruz and Florida Senator Marco Rubio are running 2nd and 3rd as of January 14th. But apart from 1st place, everything is volatile and unpredictable.

In fact, I can sum up the unpredictability of the entire process in two words: Donald Trump. A decidedly unconventional candidate, he has emerged as the frontrunner in the face of nearly unanimous opinion by party professionals, pundits, even political scientists that such a thing was impossible and that his nomination would be a catastrophe for the GOP. Trump, it seems, can say things
that no conventional candidate could get away with, and the more outrageous his claims and language, the better he does. GOP regulars are horrified, but there is nothing that they can do, as reforms over the last four decades have removed almost all of their former powers over the nomination process.

We will be able to observe the bulk of the primary process in real time. I can’t tell what will happen, but I can promise that it will be fascinating.

In the meantime, the rest of the country’s (and world’s) problems have not gone away. ISIS, Syria, Iran, Russia, terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, in Egypt and Israel and Turkey, the refugee crisis, North Korea, the European Union, China, climate change, drones, Guantanamo Bay, income inequality, gun violence, immigration, the economy, the deficit, entitlement reform, health care, are all hanging around – the full range of issues that will confront the new president.

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.

And, finally, 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 doesn’t 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 2012 and 2016 elections. 2012 because of what the results seemed to indicate about the long term prospects of the parties, 2016 because we are in the midst of it.

(3) How do presidents govern? This may seem like an obvious question, akin to asking how fish swim or birds fly (the easiest answer is, well, that’s just what they do). 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.

Here, the Obama White House provides an excellent case study. The president had developed a reputation for oratorical brilliance during the 2008 campaign, and was widely regarded as a Transformational Figure who had altered the rules of politics. In office, though, Obama has shown a tendency to get in his own way. These missteps have had a substantive effect on the president’s proposals and public image. Candidates can do this with little consequence; it’s more of a problem when a president does it. Why?

(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. Economic policy in Obama’s first term will be our focus.

Course Requirements: You should purchase the following books at the University Bookstore, Underground Textbook Exchange, Amazon, or anywhere you can get a good deal:


I will also assign some more specialized readings, which will be posted on Learn@UW. 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 reel everything in two days before the exams.

You are also required to read a national newspaper of record. The New York Times and the Washington Post are the easiest to get here (the Washington Post offers unlimited access for UW ip addresses). The National Journal (www.nationaljournal.com) offers more detailed stories about contemporary events. Most national political sources offer comprehensive free access to their web sites.

Your grade will be based on the following: a final (35%), a two midterms (20% each), and section attendance and participation (25%).

There will be two midterms, an in-class 6 week on February 25th, and a take home 12 week due on April 7th. The final exam will be a take home exam, due at 9:45AM on May 9th.

One feature of the class may be a surprise: lectures are a connectivity-free zone. You will have to go off the grid during class: no phones, no texting, no email, no browsing, no facebook/ESPN/twitter/TMZ/Buzzfeed/SnapChat/World of Warcraft, etc. This may be difficult at first – and your friends may worry that you’ve fallen down a well when you don’t respond to messages within 30 seconds – but I promise that you will not, in fact, die from disconnecting, though it may feel that way initially. You may also come to realize that you can’t pay attention in class when you are online, and that multitasking is a myth. The TA – Alex Alduncin – will help me monitor this.

I am also experimenting with a new teaching tool, called Perusall. It was developed by professors at Harvard University, and is a platform for you to comment on and raise questions about the readings in a collaborative setting. For a set of readings, you will access the site, and insert comments and questions about the reading (along with several of your classmates). The idea is to read critically, see what other students observe and have difficulty with, and engage with the material in an active fashion. The Perusall readings are listed in bold. I will provide more information about this element in class.

1 You can opt out of this, and choose to write a 1½-2 page summary of each of the readings instead.
Part I: Introduction. - Studying the presidency, and the nature of the office. Historical patterns

- Overview
Readings: Edwards and Wayne, chapter 1
Pious, Why Presidents Fail, introduction (“Presidential Fiascoes”)
The American Presidency Project (website run out of UC Santa Barbara)

- Constitutional Origins and Historical Development; Formal Powers
Readings: I. Primary Documents
Federalist 67, 70, 71, 72. (Learn@UW)
Joseph Story, Commentaries on the Constitution, sections 1485-1486. (Learn@UW)
George Washington Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789. (Learn@UW)

II. Analysis and Commentary
Marc Landy and Sidney M. Milkis, “The Presidency in History,” The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 3

- Energy in the Executive: The question of initiative, from unilateral action to the prerogative
Pious, Why Presidents Fail, chapter 6

Part II: The Politics of Presidential Elections

-Overview
Readings: Wayne, ch. 1
Connecticut Courant, September 15, 1800 (Learn@UW)

-Strategic Context: the environment, money, and the vote decision
Readings: Wayne, chs. 2-3
- Nominations and Presidential Primaries
Readings: Wayne, chs. 4-6

-The General Election and the Electoral College
Readings: Wayne, chs. 7-8,
Nate Silver, “There Is No Blue Wall,” FiveThirtyEight.Com, May 12, 2015

- the 2016 election
Nate Silver, “Trump Boom or Trump Bubble?” FiveThirtyEight.com, December 15, 2016

2016 Campaign Ads (all candidates)
The Green Papers
Wall St. Journal coverage (mostly graphics; the news page is subscriber only)
Real Clear Politics, Election Central: 2016
National Journal
270towin.com
FiveThirtyEight.com
Polling Report.com (aggregator of poll results)
Iowa Electronic Markets, 2016 Presidential Election Markets
Politico coverage of the 2016 presidential election
Open Secrets (campaign finance)
The Monkey Cage (political science commentary on the news)
The American Presidency Project – 2016 Election
The Living Room Candidate (historic campaign ads)

- Is this any Way to Pick a President?
Readings: James Bryce, “Why Great Men are Not Chosen President,” chapter 8 in The American Commonwealth (originally published 1888). Learn@UW.
Wayne, ch. 10
Part III: Presidential Governing -- Managing the Affairs of State, and Getting What You Want

- Campaigning is not Governing, and other Cautionary Tales
  readings: Wayne, ch. 9
  Bruce Miroff, “The Presidential Spectacle, The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 9

- The President and the Public and the Media; the rise of the “Public Presidency”
  readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 4-5
  FDR’s March 12, 1933 Fireside Chat
  Elvin Lim, “The Presidency and the Media,” The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 10
  Pious, Why Presidents Fail. Chapter 5

- The Presidency as an institution: The White House Office; organizational problems, managing the Executive Branch
  readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 6, 8
  John Burke, “The Institutional Presidency,” The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 11
  Stuart Eizenstat, Memorandum to President-Elect Carter, “Organizing the White House Staff,” November 8, 1980. Learn@UW.

Exercise: You will simulate a presidential advising team with 4 or 5 of your colleagues. Your assignment is to review the news over a specified date range (I’ll give the dates to you), and write up a 4-5 page summary of the news, which the president will rely on to know what is going on in the country and the world. I will provide detailed information as we approach the exercise.

- Decision making in the White House
  readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 7
  Pious, chapters 1, 2
  James Pfiffner, “Decision Making in the Obama White House,” Presidential Studies Quarterly 41:244-262. (Learn@UW)

Part IV: Governing in a "Separated System." Relations with other governmental actors.
- relations with Congress and the Separation of Powers
  readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 9
  Matthew Dickinson, “The President and Congress,” The Presidency and the Political System, chapter 15
- relations with the Judiciary
readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 10
David Yalof, “The President and the Judiciary,” *The Presidency and the Political System*, chapter 16

- The President as Head of the Executive Branch
Readings: David Lewis and Terry Moe, “The President and the Bureaucracy,” *The Presidency and the Political System*, chapter 14

- Assessing presidential leadership
Readings: Pious, chapters 10,11
Paul Quirk, “Presidential Competence,” *The Presidency and the Political System*, chapter 5

**Part V: Public Policies**
- Domestic Policy
readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 11
Pious, *Why Presidents Fail*, chapter 7

- Budget and Economic Policy
Readings: Edwards and Wayne, ch. 12
Pious, *Why Presidents Fail*, chapter 8

- Foreign Policy and War Powers
readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 13
Pious, *Why Presidents Fail*, chapters 3 and 9