Political Science 308 United States Presidency
Section 001
T/TH 12:30-1:45, Harris 2138
Fall 2025
Bill Newmann

Office Hours: 318 Founder's Hall (827 W. Franklin St): Tuesday and Thursday 2:00-3:30, or by appointment, and zoom appointments too.
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Provost Syllabus Policy Statements

POLI 308. U.S. Presidency. 3 Hours. Semester course; 3 lecture hours. 3 credits. A political and institutional study of the chief executive, focusing especially on the presidential personality and relations with Congress, the bureaucracy, the courts and the shaping of domestic and foreign policy.

Polls and Sites with Electoral College Charts

- **Gallup Poll**
- **Quinnipiac Poll**
- **Real Clear Politics Poll tracking**
- **Pew Center**
- **Washington Post polling page**
- **New York Times polling page**
- **Wall Street Journal/NBC news polls**
- **CBS News polling page**
- **538.Com polling**
- **CNN polling page**
- **Fox News polling page**
- **Polling Report.Com**

The American National Election Studies (ANES) is a scholarly database with everything. You need to register to use it (just info; no cost), and then create a password. There is a ton here, so it may require some playing around to find what you're looking for.

Use These for References to Voting in this election and past elections

- **270 to Win** (info on presidential elections)
- **Dave Leip's Atlas of US Presidential Elections** The best info on every US presidential election and more

Sites with Coverage from All Perspectives

- **Real Clear Politics** links to articles from everywhere

- **Politico** comprehensive coverage of political events

Possibly the most important sites that exist (These examine claims made by politicians, candidates, and pundits. Are they true or are they half-truths, or are they complete lies? It also checks media stories and official pronouncements of the president and congress)

- **Fact Check.Org** From the Annenberg Center at the University of Pennsylvania
- **PolitiFact.com** From several newspapers
- **The Fact Checker** From the Washington Post
- **Snopes.com** (fact checking and debunking urban legends and internet hoaxes that are often about politics)

Reference

- **Presidential Libraries**
- **Statistical Abstract of the United States** (US Census Bureau compilation of statistics on social and economic conditions in the US)
- **Gallup Presidential Approval Ratings**

Introduction

The presidency is a huge topic. Recognizing this reality, the course will take a sweeping look at the US Presidency, arguably the single most powerful office in the history of the planet. Getting a handle on the presidency is a difficult, if not impossible job. Probably the best way to start learning about the subject is to think of the US presidency as the nexus of three streams: (1) the times -- the ebb and flow of American political culture, national trends, and international historical forces; (2) the institution -- the office and powers of the office as it has evolved from the US Constitution to the media-focused, celebrity presidency of the 1980s and 1990s; and (3) the individual -- the character, vision, strengths and weaknesses of the man or woman who occupies the Oval Office. As these three streams come together the political history of the nation is shaped. The US has been called a "Presidential Nation." It is in the office of the presidency where the US people have decided to place power time and again. In the historical grappling for power between the president and congress the US people have continually sided with the president. It is the place where we look for leadership and direction. The person who occupies that office is given a stature like no other. (Has anyone seen any monuments to senators or representatives?) The president gets too much credit when things go well and too much blame when things go wrong. For better or worse, the president has become the embodiment of the nation, and therefore, his or her character, personal habits and infirmities become the stuff of national obsession, and national security.

The office of the president is the repository of the greatest powers in the land, not just in terms of physical power (the authority to use military force, even nuclear weapons), but moral power -- the ability to shift the ethical standards of a nation and to influence, if not define, the national mood. Our presidential elections often focus on issues of personal character, not issues of economic, social or foreign policy. We seem to be choosing not simply someone to run the country, but someone to represent us -- half-prime minister, half-monarch. Our choices seem to depend on the national mood.

We're studying politics in this class, but we want to approach it as scholars, not as partisans – supporters of any specific political party or ideology. In this sense, when we think of

how to judge a president or presidency, we should not try to define success subjectively -- in terms of individual political goals that those on one side or the other of the political spectrum might have, such as reducing poverty through government action or shrinking the size of the welfare state. Using these notions as the judgment of success would lead to endless debate about the purposes of government from a partisan point of view. We'll probably have a little bit of that, but we don't want it to dominate the course. It is better to try for some scholarly objectivity, by defining success in the following manner -- did the president achieve what he set out to do? Did the president improve the quality of US democracy? Whether you, as an individual, shared the goals of one president or another, is irrelevant to this question. Analytically, the focus should be upon how successful was any president in attaining the goals that he sets for himself, and of upholding and protecting the constitution. We should, of course, be wary of leaders who accomplish their goals by destroying the constitutional order.

By the "modern" presidency I refer to the presidency as it has been defined since Franklin Roosevelt. It is FDR who, with the help of national crises of the Depression and WW II, transformed the presidency into the focus of power that it is today. He also raised expectations so high that it is doubtful that any president can meet those expectations for any length of time. Can the job be done? That is what we will focus on during the course of the semester. We will examine the powers of the presidency, the men who have held the office, and the shifting demands that our political culture places on both the office and the individual.

We, of course, will look at how the last few presidencies operated (Bush 43, Obama, and Trump), and we'll also spend a lot of time examining how President Trump shattered some of the established norms of the presidency.

Some of the issues we will discuss include: The Presidency and the Constitution; Presidential Character; The Roosevelt Revolution; "The Personal Presidency;" Presidential Management Styles; Bureaucracy, Organizations, and Presidential Power; The "Imperial Presidency" and Foreign Policy; The White House Staff and its power; Watergate and the abuse of power; The post-Watergate Presidency; The Reagan Revolution; The President and the media; Presidential Campaigns; Expectations of the President; Image making; Shifting Coalitions in Presidential Voting; Red and Blue America; and the Trump Phenomenon.

We will also spend some time looking at the current crisis in American Democracy. In the long run, presidential power has been expanding in ways that are often seen as detrimental to the checks and balances built into the system. In essence, some think we are evolving into a system where congressional oversight disappears and presidential authority is unchallenged. President Trump challenged or obliterated long standing norms in American politics, both in terms of the tone of presidential communication and the limits to presidential power. As he repeatedly said: Article 2 allows him to do whatever he wants, and gives him "total authority." That is only true in an authoritarian system. The fundamental nature of democracy rejects total authority by anyone at any time. Only dictators or monarchs have total authority. Our extreme polarization has led us to a critical juncture. If we evolve into a system where parties believe that presidents from their own party can have absolute power, while presidents of the opposition party can have no power, we are no longer a functioning democracy. I can't emphasize enough the crisis we are facing. A majority of the members of the current Republican Party believe that the 2020 election was stolen by the Democratic Party and that Biden was never legally president. This is absolutely 100% false, but they still believe it. *The certification by congress of the 2020 election was disrupted by a violent riot, during which protestors attacked and invaded the Capitol Building in search of members of congress they verbally threatened to kill.* Read that

sentence again, and think about that. The refusal to accept the outcome of an election and an armed attempt to stop the transfer of power are two of the hallmarks of the death of the democratic process in a country. Our continued ability to hold elections and transfer power peacefully is at risk. By the end of the semester, you'll know multiple perspectives on how we got to this unstable era in American history. It is possible that scholars writing fifty years from now might label this era "the collapse of the first American Republic." This is what keeps me up at night. I apologize for sharing my nightmare.

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will be able to differentiate between and evaluate approaches to studying the presidency, particularly the historical, institutional, and character.
2. Students will be able to differentiate between and evaluate theories of the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern presidencies.
3. Students will be able to evaluate the evolution of presidential power, in the context of American history, tools of presidential persuasion, and the relationships between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches
4. Students will be able to evaluate the impact of significant presidencies, in terms of both successes and failures in presidential leadership
5. Students will be able to evaluate the relationship between political realignment and the presidency, particularly in the context of coalition formation and ideological change within the US and within US political parties.
6. Students will be able to evaluate the evolution of presidential economic policy and its central role in shaping the politics of the nation
7. Students will demonstrate the ability to research and write a paper for political science

Texts: You need to read them; you don't need to buy them. There is a lot of reading for this course, but it is fun reading. I've tried to keep the dry political science textbook style to a minimum. I've assigned mostly journalistic accounts that are entertaining and educational. The books are available at the VCU Bookstore. Some of them may be found also at the large chain bookstores in town (Barnes and Noble) or online through the VCU library system (see links below). If anyone has problems getting access to the texts, for any reason, let me know as soon as possible so you don't get too far behind in the reading. You may find these texts in other places; be sure you get an edition of the text that includes everything that is in the edition I have assigned. I will place books on reserve as well, and let you know when that is done.

Assigned Texts:

- Fred I. Greenstein. *Inventing the Job of President: Leadership Style from George Washington to Andrew Jackson* (Princeton University Press, 2014) Available online through the VCU Library: https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vcu/detail.action?pq-origsite=primo&docID=729943
- Doris Kearns Goodwin. *Leadership in Turbulent Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019)

https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/lib/vcu/detail.action?pq-origsite=primo&docID=5676800

- Chris Whipple. *The Gatekeepers: How the White House Chiefs of Staff Define Every Presidency* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018) There will be a copy of this book placed on reserve soon at the Cabell Library front desk. I'll let you know when it is ready. It belongs to me, so be nice to it.
- Andrew Rudalevige. *The New Imperial Presidency* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vcu/detail.action?docID=3414465 **or** https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.library.vcu.edu/2027/heb33761.0001.001
- Links to an external site.
- Charles Sykes. *How the Right Lost Its Mind* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017) There will be a copy of this book placed on reserve soon at the Cabell Library front desk. I'll let you know when it is ready. It belongs to me, so be nice to it.

Grading System: Grades will be determined through the following:

Short Answer Quiz	*September 18*	10% of the grade
Exam One	*October 7*	30% of the grade
Research Paper	*Rough drafts accepted until October 30 (optional) November 6: due at the beginning of class in hard copy or emailed to me by the beginning of class.*	30% of the grade
Exam Two	*December 9: 12:30-3:20 in the regular classroom*	30% of the grade

How do you calculate your grade? Use the percentages from the above table. So, if you received the following grades, you would calculate your grades in the following manner:

- Exam One: 92, at 30% of the grade; that's 92 multiplied by .30 = 27.6
- Citation Assignment, 100 at .05% of the grade; that's 100 multiplied by.05 = 5
- Research Paper: 89, at 30% of the grade; that's 89 multiplied by .30 = 26.7
- Exam Two: 90, at 35% of the grade; that's 90 multiplied by .35 = 31.5
- To get the final grade, add up all the scores: 27.6 + 31.15 + 31.5 = 90.8. Congratulations you got an A.

I give you this very detailed formula for a number of reasons. You should never be unaware of what your class average is. You can calculate it at any point in the semester. If your grade is not what you'd like it to be, you should know, and you should come see me about it. Please don't wait to come to my office hours until after the final exam and then tell me that you're having trouble in the class. It's too late at that point; there's nothing that I'd be able to do to help at that point. But any time in the semester that you feel you are having trouble, or not doing as well as you feel you should, come talk to me. During my office hours and by appointment I am happy to talk to you about the class

Grading scale: I use a typical scale: A = 90-100; B = 80-89; C = 70-79; D = 55-69. Borderline grades are considered in the following manner.

- If your grade is 69.5, 79.5, or 89.5 or higher, then you may be a candidate for a round up to the higher grade (Notice those numbers in the sentence; do not ask for a higher grade if your average is a 68 or 78 or 88 or lower; those are not borderline averages).

- You may become a candidate if your grades are borderline and if your grades have been going up during the semester.
- That means that if you are borderline, but your last exam is lower than the previous exams (you are between a B and C, but your third exam is a C for example), you will probably get the lower grade.
- If you are borderline, and your last exam is higher than the previous exams (you are between a B and C, but your third exam is a B), you will probably get the higher grade.
- Another factor I consider is the typical grade you receive. Let's say we have three grades for the class and two are grades of B and one is a C (bad day) and your average is a 79.6, you are a candidate for receiving a B. If you have three grades and two grades are grades of C and one is a grade of B, you are probably not candidate for a round up to the next grade.
- There is no extra credit for this class. Please do not ask.

One more thing: The withdrawal date is October 31.

Short Answer Quiz

Your midterm and final exams will consist of short answer and an essay. See the next paragraph. To get you warmed up for the exam and familiar with this style of exam, I will give you a short answer quiz. The quiz will just be a set of short answers you'll need to identify – the same type of short answer you'll have for the exams. A week before this quiz, I'll give you a review sheet with terms from the lectures. The quiz will be in class on the day indicated on the schedule during the first 20 minutes of class. I'll take five terms from the review sheet. You'll choose two to answer. I'm looking for 5-6 sentences telling me what the term means and why it's important.

- **Short Answer Review**

EXAMS:

At least one week before the exam I will put a review sheet online. It will be linked to the syllabus below this paragraph. In general, the review sheets should be used as your study guide for the exam. The review sheet will include some terms that are from the readings only, so that you can go back and review those items from the readings. Once you have the review sheet, feel free to ask me questions about the terms. This is the best way to study for the exam. If you understand the terms on the review sheet, you can define each one and see how each one relates to the larger concepts and issues we've discussed in class, you should do just fine on the exam.

Exams will be in class. See the dates below. Each exam will consist of two parts.

- The first part will be short answers (a choice of 2 out of 8-10). I'm looking for about a half page for a short answer. Identify the term and tell me why it is important. All terms are lifted directly from the review sheet.
- The second part of the exam will be an essay question. There will be multiple questions to choose from here too. As we get closer to the exams, I will talk more about the essay format.

Review 1
Review 2

Research Paper: The full assignment is linked right here. The topic is an assigned topic, but you have lots of leeway about how you want to approach it. Your assignment should be fun or maybe scary: Explain the Trump Phenomenon: How has Donald Trump captured the loyalty of the Republican Party in ways that no American politician ever has in such a short time? Some basics:

- 10-12 pages; more is fine; less is not helpful for your grade.
- Due at the beginning of class on November 6 in hard copy if you come to class or it can be emailed if you generally do not attend class (be careful here; an email problem will not be an excuse for turning in a paper late). A few minutes after class starts, the paper is late.
- You may turn in an outline, rough draft, partial paper, whatever, for review up until October 30. This is optional, just something to help you out if you have questions.
- Typed
- 11- or 12-point font
- Double spaced
- One-inch margins
- Late Papers: Talk to me if you are having some medical or family or personal problems or any difficulty with any of the assignments. The point of this class is for you to learn about the US presidency, and in this crisis, that means giving everyone a lot of wiggle room. So, if you're having any problems, talk to me. We can work it out. I do realize that there are more important things in life than this class and these assignments. Sleeping late, work schedule, forgetting the due date or computer problems are not reasons for getting an extension. But talk to me anyway, no matter the reason you think you might not make the deadline.

Stuff:
The following are some fun or useful PPT slideshows. Take a look if you're interested. They are not required; none of the material will be on a test.
President's Park PPT
Being a Good Political Consumer

Presidential Library Tour
Wilson to Ike
Kennedy and Johnson
Nixon and Ford
Carter
Reagan
Bush 41
Clinton

COURSE AND READING SCHEDULE

Week 1: August 18-22: Introduction

- Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich**.** ***Truth Decay****: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2018), pp. 1-7, 21-40, and 191-221.
- Read the Constitution
    - **Official US Government Printing Office version**
    - **National Archives original text annotated version** (with links to changes in the constitution)
- **Social Media Brief PPT**

Week 2: August 25--29: Powers of the Presidency I: The Constitution and Presidential Power

- Greenstein, Chapters 1-4, and 8
- **Introduction Part 1 PPT**

Week 3: September 1-5: Powers of the Presidency II: Our Current Crisis

- Rudalevige, Introduction and Chapter 1
- **Introduction Part 2 PPT**

Week 4: September 8-12 Powers of the Presidency III: What is Too Much Presidential Power?

- Goodwin, Chapters 1, 5 and 9
- **Electoral College to January 6 PPT**

Week 5: September 15-19: Pre-Modern Presidents

- *September 18: Short Answer Quiz*
- Goodwin, Chapters 2, 6, and 10
- **Pre-Modern Presidents PPT**

Week 6: September 22-26: FDR: The Modern Presidency Begins

- Goodwin, Chapters 3, 7, and 11
- **FDR PPT**

Week 7: September 29--October 3: Managing the Presidency: Ike and JFK

- Goodwin, Chapters 4, 8, and 12 (for second exam)
- **Leadership, Management, Advising PPT**
- **LBJ PPT**

Week 8: October 6-10: LBJ and the Power of Persuasion*:*

- *Exam 1: October 7*
- Whipple, Introduction, Chapter 1 (for second exam)

Week 9: October 13-17: Nixon's Rise and Fall

- Rudalevige, Chapter 3 and 4
- **Nixon PPT**
- **Watergate PPT**
- **Scandals Comparison**

Week 10: October 20-24: The Reagan Realignment

- Whipple, Chapters 4, and 5
- Rudalevige 5 and 6
- **Reagan PPT**

Withdrawal Date October 31

Week 11: October 22-31: 1990s: When Polarization Began Exactly When it Shouldn't Have

- Whipple, Chapters 6, 7 and 8
- *Optional rough drafts accepted until October 30; it can be emailed*
- **The 1990s: Bush 41 and Clinton**

Week 12: November 3-7: GW Bush, The Unitary Executive, and the New Imperial Presidency

- *No class November 4: VOTE! Because the people who believe that the earth is flat will be voting and you don't want them deciding the future of the US. Vote because you wouldn't want your parents picking out your clothes or you ordering your dinner. Why let them decide the future of the nation?*
- *Paper Due November 6*
- No readings
- **Bush and Obama PPT**

Week 13: November 10-14: GW Bush to Obama

- Whipple Chapter 9

- Rudalevige, Chapters 7 and 8

Week 14: November 17—21: Trump and the Challenge to US Democracy
- Sykes Introduction, Chapters 1-9

Fall Break: November 24-28

Week 15: December 1-5: What's Going On?
- Sykes, Chapters 10-17.
- **Trump PPT 2025**

***Final Exam: December 9**: 12:30—3:20*

Other Important Stuff

Political Science Advising
If you are a Political Science major, we highly recommend that you meet with your friendly and helpful POLI advisors, Nathan Bickett and Jen Clayton, at least once a semester to make sure you are on track - doing what you need to do and not doing what you don't need to do - and to discuss your academic and professional goals. Current minors and those considering a POLI major or minor are also encouraged to visit.

You may make an appointment through the Navigator app or through a link on your VCU Portal (remote advising webpage). You may also reach us at poliadvisor@vcu.edu

Political Science Librarian
Nia Rodgers is the librarian for Political Science. She can help you find peer-reviewed materials to use in your research. She can be reached at: slrodgers@vcu.edu or you can make an appointment at: https://vcu.libcal.com/appointment/8778

Students should visit **http://go.vcu.edu/syllabus** and review all syllabus statement information. The full university syllabus statement includes information on safety, registration, the VCU Honor Code, student conduct, withdrawal and more.