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:

Two days ago, Obama was inaugurated for a second term. What is notable about his agenda is that it isn’t much different than what he did in the first, and he has continued many policies from the Bush Administration – detention, extraordinary rendition, keeping Guantanamo Bay open, drone attacks – and pushed even farther on others, such as claiming the power to order, without any judicial review, the targeted killings of people – even American citizens – who are connected with Al Qaeda or its affiliates.

2 ½ months ago, a president often given up for dead won a decisive re-election, beating an overmatched challenger with a strategy that was a textbook example of changing the frame of the campaign. In the face of numerous indicators that suggested a tough slog for reelection – high unemployment, low popularity, an unpopular domestic agenda – Obama’s victory was a surprise to Republican elites, many of whom were convinced that Romney would take the White House.

Two years ago we witnessed an historic presidential election. There are millions of Blacks old enough to have experienced the violence, repression, and systematic disenfranchisement of the Jim Crow era. Fifty years ago, African Americans risked being murdered when they tried to vote. In 2008, an African American was elevated to the country’s (indeed, the world’s) most powerful office.

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, 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 is in fact what they should want in order to further their own interest. 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. We will also consider how 9/11 has affected presidential authority.
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 a the 2012 election, which was unusual in a number of respects, particularly how divisive the Republican primary process was, the perceived weakness of Obama going into the general election, and what the results say about the long term prospects of the parties.

(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 health care reform. The legislation ultimately passed, but only because of huge amounts of arm-twisting and backroom deals (google “Cornhusker kickback” or “Louisiana Purchase 2009” to see what I mean).

Here, the Obama White House provides an excellent case study. The president had developed a reputation for oratorical brilliance during the 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:

(note: the bookstore has a combined loose leaf form, which excludes redundant chapters and is cheaper than the usual versions)

George C. Edwards, III. *The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity*

Bob Woodward, *The Price of Politics* (an account of the negotiations over the debt ceiling that took place during Summer 2011)

Jack Goldsmith, *Power and Constraint: The Accountability Presidency after 9/11*

I will also assign some more specialized readings, which will be posted on the course web page in electronic format. The reading load is moderate, 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.

I urge you to read a national newspaper of record. The New York Times and the Wall Street Journal are the easiest to get here. The National Journal, published weekly (available via library electronic journal, as well as through Pro-Quest), offers more detailed stories about contemporary events. Most national news sources offer comprehensive free access to their web sites. This is a reasonable substitute for subscribing.

Your grade will be based on the following: a final (40%), a two midterms (20% each), and section attendance and participation (20%).

There will be two midterms, an in-class 6 week on February 28th and a take home 12 week due on April 11th. The final exam will be a take home exam, due at 4:30PM on Friday, May 17th.

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/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 TAs will monitor this.
Part I: Introduction. - Studying the presidency, and the nature of the office. Historical patterns
- Overview
Readings: Edwards and Wayne, chapter 1
Federalist 67, 70, 71, 72
Joseph Story, Commentaries on the Constitution, sections 1485-1486

- Constitutional Origins and Historical Development; Formal Powers
Readings: Edward S. Corwin, The President: Office and Powers, 1787-1957, pp. 3-30
Gary J. Schmitt, “President Washington’s Proclamation of Neutrality,” in Joseph M.
Bessette and Jeffrey K. Tulis, The Constitutional Presidency (Baltimore: Johns
Hopkins University Press, 2009)

- The problem of prerogative: formative issues and the development of Presidential Power, and the
effects of national emergencies
Readings: Goldsmith, chapter 1-2
Richard M. Pious, “Prerogative Power and Presidential Politics,” in George C.
Presidency (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Part II: The Politics of Presidential Elections
-Overview
Readings: Wayne, ch. 1

-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
Readings: Wayne, chs. 7-8

- 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)
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
Edwards, chapter 1

- The President and the Public and the Media; the rise of the “Public Presidency”
readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 4-5
Edwards, ch. 2-3
Goldsmith, ch. 3
FDR’s March 12, 1933 Fireside Chat

- The Presidency as an institution: The White House Office; organizational problems, managing the Executive Branch
readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 6, 7, 9

- Psychological Approaches
Readings: Edwards and Wayne, ch. 8

Part IV: Governing in a "Separated System." Relations with other governmental actors.
- relations with Congress and the Separation of Powers
readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 10, 15
          Edwards, ch. 4-5

- relations with the Judiciary
readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 11

NOTE: Start reading Woodward now, a couple of chapters every few days

- national security accountability in the 9/11 era
Readings: Goldsmith, chapters 3-4

- The President and the Military: The day-to-day politics of civil-military relations, and National Security policymaking
          Goldsmith, chapters 5-6

- Assessing presidential leadership
Readings: Edwards, ch. 6

Part V: Public Policies
- Domestic Policy
readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 12

- Budget and Economic Policy and the Recession and the Housing Bubble and Lehman Brothers and the debt ceiling and the fiscal cliff and the Coming Entitlement Crisis MELTDOWN train wreck. Train wreck sounds about right.
Readings: Edwards and Wayne, ch. 13
          Woodward, entire (you did start reading it a few weeks ago, right?)

- Foreign Policy and War Powers
readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 14
          Goldsmith, ch. 7 and afterword