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:

9 months into his second term, Obama is struggling to get traction for his agenda. On top of the usual problems (a recalcitrant House Republican majority, a slow economic recovery, a lack of success on key initiatives such as gun control and immigration reform), he faces the consequences of a massive leak of critical national security information. In May 2013, the British newspaper The Guardian published documents on a highly classified National Security Agency email and web surveillance program (PRISM), triggering both criminal charges and a debate over privacy and surveillance. There is evidence that the NSA spied on allies, as well as the United Nations. How can a president function when even the government can’t even protect the most sensitive and highly classified intelligence information that exists? What does that say about the prospects for meaningful control of the bureaucracy? How does Obama deal with the political and diplomatic fallout?

What should Obama do about Syria? Having drawn a “red line” at the use of chemical weapons, he is in a difficult spot now that there is close to definitive evidence that the Syrian government has used them. Does he attack, and risk inflaming the region? Do nothing, and risk a loss of prestige and influence? Push for more diplomacy? How does this complicate relations with Russia? China? What of the “Arab Spring”? This issue raises a key point about international affairs: the U.S. does not have a lot of influence over what other countries do. Military force is always an option, but it is high risk. While you’re at it, there’s Egypt, too.

Obama promised during his 2008 campaign that he would scale back much of the Bush Administration’s War on Terror. Yet 5 hears in, he has continued many policies from the Bush Administration – detention, extraordinary rendition, keeping Guantanamo Bay open¹, 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. What happened? Was Obama just saying what he needed to say in order to get elected? Or is there something else going on?

¹ Not entirely fair, as he is legislatively prohibited from moving detainees into the U.S. Even without this restriction, however, it would have been nearly impossible for Obama to follow through on his promise, no matter how sincere he was in his intention. An announcement that the government would try Khalid Sheik Mohammed (the 9/11 mastermind) in federal court in New York triggered overwhelming opposition, including from Democrats, leading Obama to drop the plan.
10 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.

Five 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 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 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:


George C. Edwards, III. The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity (Princeton University Press)

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 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 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 October 10th, and a take home 12 week due on November 19th. The final exam will be a take home exam, due at 4:45PM on December 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/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 TAs will monitor this.

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**Part I: Introduction. - Studying the presidency, and the nature of the office. Historical patterns**

- Overview
  Readings: Edwards and Wayne, chapter 1
  Howell, chapter 1
  *Federalist* 67, 70, 71, 72
  Joseph Story, *Commentaries on the Constitution*, sections 1485-1486

- Constitutional Origins and Historical Development; Formal Powers
  Readings: Howell, chapter 3
  Edward S. Corwin, *The President: Office and Powers, 1787-1957*, pp. 3-30

- Energy in the Executive: The question of initiative, from unilateral action to the prerogative
  Readings: Howell, chapters 2 and 4
Part II: The Politics of Presidential Elections (start reading Balz, Collision, now)

- Overview
  Readings: Wayne, ch. 1
            Balz, chapters 1-6

- Strategic Context: the environment, money, and the vote decision
  Readings: Wayne, chs. 2-3
            Balz, chapters 7-8

- Nominations and Presidential Primaries
  Readings: Wayne, chs. 4-6
            Balz, chapters 9-18

- The General Election
  Readings: Wayne, chs. 7-8
            Balz, chapters 19-24

- Understanding elections: forecasting methods and accuracy
  Readings: Wayne, chapter 9, pages 292-305

- the 2012 election
  Readings: Balz, remainder (including epilogue)

- 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, pages 306-323
            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
            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, 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. 9
            Edwards, ch. 4-5

- relations with the Judiciary
  readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 10

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

- Assessing presidential leadership
  Readings Edwards, ch. 6
            Howell, chapters 5-7

**Part V: Public Policies**

- Domestic Policy
  readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 11

- 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 Explosion MELTDOWN train wreck. Train wreck sounds about right.
  Readings: Edwards and Wayne, ch. 12

- Foreign Policy and War Powers
  readings: Edwards/Wayne, ch. 13