Course Description

Defining presidential power and understanding the process of presidential policy-making has been a mystifying task for students of the presidency as well as its practitioners. Many tools of social science have been applied to the study of the presidency, including psychological theories, sophisticated econometric techniques, historical analysis, and survey research. In this course we will survey some of this work in an attempt to understand the role of the president in the political system. We will examine the various theoretical approaches to studying the presidency, presidential selection, presidential power, interbranch relations, the role of the public, political parties, and the media, and presidential policy-making in foreign and domestic policy. I will also provide a historical perspective, emphasizing changes in the nature of the presidency in the 200-year history of our nation. Many of the examples of a given concept or topic will come from the Obama presidency, but we will draw on the experiences of other presidents as well.

Course Format

This course will be primarily a lecture class given its size. Yet, I encourage class participation. I often will begin class with a discussion of current events, especially as they relate to the presidency. I encourage you to bring questions to class and to respond to issues I may raise. You also will have the opportunity to discuss the readings and lectures in your weekly discussion sections. The goals of this class are both theoretical and practical: I aim to give you a theoretical basis for understanding the presidency and a greater awareness of the events to which theory can be applied. I also hope to provide you the tools you need to assess the role of the presidency within the political system, evaluate the performance of any given president, and engage you in national politics.

Readings for the Course

The following books are required for the course and are available for purchase at the University of Wisconsin Bookstore on State Street. There also is a set of readings that is available on Moodle through MyUW. These readings are required and will be important in the course (especially for discussion section). I also will probably email you a few articles throughout the semester on important, fast-evolving issues. I also encourage you (and this should be a lifetime habit rather than a course assignment) to read a good daily newspaper, or at least a news weekly. The New York Times is available at 60% off the cover price to all UW students (I will hand out subscription forms on the first day of class). I encourage you to subscribe if you do not already have access to high quality national news. This will enhance your understanding of the material presented in class and will make you better able to participate in class discussion. Here are the required books:

Student Responsibilities

This will not be new advice, but it is essential to read the assigned readings each week before coming to class and discussion section. It is not possible to put off the reading until just before the exams and expect to do well in the class. Some of the reading will be discussed in class, but others will be points of departure for class discussion and material that I will present in lecture. I expect a critical reading of the material. Do not accept everything you read – you certainly will not agree with everything you are presented with in this class. You will gain much more from class meetings and discussion section if you come prepared. The course outline will be followed as closely as possible; major departures from the schedule will be noted.

Course Evaluation

There will be a midterm that counts for 25% of your grade, a 10-page research paper that is 30%, attendance and participation in section is 10%, and a final exam will be 35%. The format of the exams will be a combination of multiple choice, identification, and essay. The final exam will only be partially comprehensive (75% will be on material since the midterm and 25% will be comprehensive). All reading material and lectures will be fair game on the exams. In calculating the final grade, number grades rather than letter grades will be averaged. I will give you more details about the paper assignment in a few weeks, but briefly, it will be a 10-page paper that examines one aspect of the presidency (of your choice), such as relations with Congress or the bureaucracy, influencing economic policy, or war powers, in the context of two different presidencies.

Course Outline

I. Approaches to Studying the Presidency

A. Studying and thinking about presidents – January 21

Edwards and Wayne, Presidential Leadership, Chapter 1.
Howell, Thinking About the Presidency, Chapter 4.

B. Evaluating presidents – January 23

James Bryce, “Why Great Men Are Not Chosen President,” from The American Commonwealth, 1891, on Moodle.

C. Constitutional Foundations– January 28-30

William Howell, Thinking About the Presidency, Chapter 3, pp. 55-70.
D. Historical Approach–February 4


E. Psychological Approach–February 6


F. Power Approach–February 11-13

Howell, Chapters 1 and 2, pp. 1-54.

II. Getting Elected

A. The Nomination Process and Reform – February 18-20


B. The general election, presidential mandates, and reforming the electoral college – February 25-27


III. Constraints--Outside the Beltway

A. Public Opinion–March 4-6


B. Political Parties – March 11

********** In Class Midterm Exam on Thursday, March 13th **********
(exam will cover readings through March 11th)

***** Spring Break, March 17-21 *****

D. Race, Politics, and Obama – March 27

Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Fear of a Black President,” The Atlantic, September 2012, on Moodle.

E. The Media– March 25

Edwards and Wayne, Presidential Leadership, Chapter 5, pp. 159-201.
link from the Moodle site.

IV. Constraints--Inside the Beltway

A. The Bureaucracy– April 1

Edwards and Wayne, Presidential Leadership, Chapter 8, pp. 280-327.
Presidential Studies Quarterly, March, 2009, 5-9, on Moodle.

B. The Courts–April 3

Kevin Bogardus and Ben Goad, “Obama’s use of executive power faces reckoning at Supreme Court,” The Hill, January 12, 2014, on Moodle.

C. Congress– April 8-10

Edwards and Wayne, Presidential Leadership, Chapter 9, pp. 328-374.

V. The Policy Making Process

A. Presidential Staff, Presidential Style, and Decision Making -- April 15-17


B. Foreign Policy Making Process– April 22-24

Irving Janis, Chapters 1 and 8, in *Groupthink*, 2-13, 174-97, on Moodle.

C. Domestic Policy Making Process and the Budget– April 29-May 1


*** Paper due in class on May 1st ***

VI. Assessing the Presidency and Prospects for Change– May 6-8

Howell, Chapters 5-7, pp. 92-143.

***** Final Exam on Wednesday, May 14th, 2:30-4:30 p.m., location to be announced *****