GOVT 35:
The Presidency

Instructor: Prof. Brendan Nyhan
Office: 305 Silsby
Email: nyhan@dartmouth.edu
Phone: 603/646-2894

Classroom: Silsby 213
Schedule: MWF 1:45 PM–2:50 PM
x-period: Th. 1 PM–1:50 PM
Office hours: F 9:00–10:30 AM or by appt.

“I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events
have controlled me.”
–Abraham Lincoln

“The presidency has made every man who occupied it, no matter
how small, bigger than he was; and no matter how big, not big
enough for its demands.”
–Lyndon B. Johnson

“Someone said that being a president was a lot like running a ceme-
tery: There are a lot of people under you, but nobody’s listening.”
–Bill Clinton

“Obama Blanks On What He’s Ineffectually Urging Congress To
Take Action On Now”
–The Onion

Overview of the course

This course provides a modern political science perspective on the presidency,
focusing particular attention on the “leadership dilemma”—the gap between
the expectations that are placed on presidents and their limited institutional
powers. Our goal is to understand the conditions under which presidents are
more (or less) likely to achieve their objectives. As we’ll see, the answers are
more complex than most people think.

The course begins with a whirlwind tour of the historical development of
the institution of the presidency. After reviewing different scholarly approaches
to understanding the presidency, we’ll consider the president’s relationship with
Congress, the courts, and the bureaucracy; his influence on foreign policy; his
relationship with the press and the public; and presidential elections.

Throughout this process, we will be discussing the current administration
and relating President Obama’s experience to ideas we have discussed in class.

Instructional approach

Each class period will begin with a brief lecture highlighting and expanding
on key points from the readings and answering any questions about them. The
remainder of the course period will consist of class discussion and active learning exercises in which we critically examine those ideas.

**Learning objectives**

By the end of the course, you should be able to:

- Describe the development of the modern presidency and evaluate the causes and consequences of major changes in the institution over time;
- Explain the formal and informal mechanisms that the president can use to achieve his objectives when interacting with other branches of government, the bureaucracy, and the public;
- Identify the institutional and political constraints that limit the president’s ability to achieve his objectives;
- Assess the president’s influence on foreign policy;
- Analyze the major factors affecting the outcome of presidential primary and general election campaigns;
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to the study of these topics.

I expect each student to complete and understand the assigned readings. However, we will aspire to not just learn this material but to take it in new directions, applying theories to new contexts such as current events, drawing connections between the readings, and critiquing authors’ assumptions, theories, and findings. The course is structured to help you take these additional steps in your thinking over the course of the quarter.

**Course requirements and expectations**

Students are expected to complete the assigned reading before each class. You are also expected to follow political news—we will often begin class by discussing how current events relate to class material. Finally, students must be respectful of others during classroom discussion.

**Background knowledge**

I assume students have a basic conceptual understanding of the American political system and its history (GOVT 3 or equivalent). Please contact me immediately with any questions about your preparation. For those who would like to strengthen their background knowledge, a recommended text on the history of the presidency is Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson, *The American Presidency: Origins and Development 1776-2011*, 6th edition, which you may borrow from me (the library has older editions as well).
Communication

The class will be run through Canvas. I will use it to email announcements to you and provide access to assigned readings. Please submit your work to me through its assignments function rather than by email. However, if you have questions, feel free to come to my office hours or email me.

Studying

Many students do not study effectively. I highly recommend Vox’s guide to improving how you prepare for exams. For more information, please contact the Academic Skills Center.

Laptop/electronic device policy

Laptops, cell phones, and other electronic devices may not be used during class without the permission of the instructor. You should therefore make sure to print all readings before class. This policy is motivated by the growing body of research which finds that the use of laptops hinders learning not just for the people who use them but the students around them as well. Multitasking is unfortunately distracting and cognitively taxing. In addition, research suggests that students take notes more effectively in longhand than when they write on laptops.

Academic integrity

Students are responsible for understanding the academic integrity rules at Dartmouth. Explanations of integrity rules and principles can be found at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~uja/. Ignorance of the Academic Honor Principle will not be considered an excuse if a violation occurs. Beyond any penalties imposed as a consequence of an Academic Honor Principle investigation, any student who is found to have cheated or plagiarized on any assignment will receive a failing grade in the class. Details on citing sources appropriately are available at http://writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/learning/materials/sources-and-citations-dartmouth. Please see me immediately if you have any questions or concerns.

Students with disabilities

Students with disabilities enrolled in this course who may need disability-related classroom accommodations are encouraged to make an appointment to see me before the end of the second week of the term. All discussions will remain confidential, although the Student Accessibility Services office may be consulted to discuss appropriate implementation of any accommodation requested.
Religious observances

Some students may wish to take part in religious observances that occur during this academic term. If you have a religious observance that conflicts with your participation in the course, please meet with me before the end of the second week of the term to discuss appropriate accommodations.

Office hours

My office hours for this course are Friday from 9:00–10:30 AM. To ensure you have a time that works for you, please schedule a meeting with me using my ScheduleOnce page at http://meetme.so/BrendanNyhan. I will prioritize appointments over walk-ins though I am of course happy to meet with any student if time permits. (If you cannot make it to office hours, please email me to schedule an alternate meeting time.)

Assignments and grading

Grading in this class will be based on the components described below (but adjusted for the distribution of scores in the course — don’t worry about raw scores!). In general, each student is expected to attend class on time with the readings completed and to contribute thoughtfully to class discussion when appropriate. Especially thoughtful contributions to class discussion will be taken into consideration when final grades are assigned. I also reserve the right to grade students down for using laptops for any purpose other than taking notes because it often distracts other students. Finally, late work will be graded down 10% for each day it is submitted after a deadline.

Quizzes – 10%

During the quarter, several classes will begin with a one-question quiz intended to determine if you completed the readings (one point will be awarded simply for attending class). Your lowest score during the quarter will be dropped.

Short paper – 10%

Each student will be required to write a short paper of 1500–2000 words that makes a specific argument related to the presidency drawing on at least two of the assigned readings for a specific class session. It is not necessary to summarize all of the readings or even aspects of the readings you draw on that are not relevant to your argument. Instead, you should present an argument that considers applications and implications of two or more of the theories and research findings presented and/or raises questions, concerns, or criticisms about the limitations of the assigned readings.

You should also include three discussion questions based on the readings that will be shared with the class at the end of your paper. You will be randomly
assigned to one of the class sessions after the first week of the course and will be expected to be a contributor to discussion during that session.

The short paper and discussion questions are due January 18 by 5 PM so that I can provide feedback on your writing as soon as possible. The rubric I will use to evaluate your papers is provided at the end of the syllabus.

Midterms – 50%
There will be two closed-book in-class midterms (25% each) testing your knowledge and understanding of the readings from that portion of the course. These may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, short answer questions, and/or brief essays. An exam study guide is provided at the end of the syllabus. (Note: These will be curved! Don’t panic about your raw score.)

Analytical paper – 30%
Each student will write an analytical paper of 3000—4000 words (excluding references) in which you apply one or more theories we’ve read to the Bush 43 or Obama presidency. You should identify a theoretically interesting argument that generates one or more predictions or expectations that you can evaluate using historical sources, journalistic accounts, or quantitative data. The theory or prediction can be yours or an author’s, but ideally you will be adding new ideas or analysis beyond just testing a theory that we discuss in class. In general, you should be engaging with a larger scholarly literature outside of the assigned readings, which will help you go beyond the theories we’ve discussed and/or look at more detailed evidence. For instance, one author may state that $X \to Y$, but you might predict that $X$ only affects $Y$ under condition $Z$. Alternatively, you might test competing predictions — for example, author A argues that $X$ increases $Y$ and author B argues that $X$ decreases $Y$. The citations in the works we read in class are excellent guides to the relevant literature as well as who is citing research of interest in Google Scholar (click on “Cited by ...”).

In the course of making your argument, you should answer these questions:

1. What would the author’s theory predict? Why?
2. Is what we observe consistent with their prediction(s)? Why or why not?
3. What implications does this evidence have for their theory (i.e., strengths and weaknesses)? How could it be improved?
4. What conclusions should we draw from your findings about the study of your topic more generally?

Other notes and suggestions:
• You don’t need to do data collection as such, but you should think about how to reasonably evaluate a prediction or expectation. For instance, I wouldn’t expect you to code all the legislation passed under Obama for importance, but you could identify some reasonable proxy of bill importance and evaluate a few key bills relative to the theory or prediction in question.

• Please make sure your theories are not about proper names. For example, you wouldn’t want to study the effect of Sandy Hook on President Obama’s approval rating. Instead, you would want to write a paper on applying theories of presidential approval to mass shootings or other tragedies more generally even though the evidence you will consider will be from Obama’s time in office.

• Make sure to keep the scope of your paper manageable both substantively and theoretically (i.e., don’t try to explain everything!). You should also try to minimize the space you devote to summaries of other people’s work—the goal is to extend and critique the arguments of the authors you have read, not to recapitulate them.

We will talk throughout the term about how to do this type of writing. For useful advice on writing analytical papers in political science, please see the assigned readings for the January 6 class, but the most important factor will be your willingness to commit to writing as an iterative process of drafting, feedback, review, and revision.

**Paper timeline**

A draft one-page proposal/outline for your paper topic (including outside references) is due before class on February 8. After getting feedback from your classmates, you should then submit a revised version of that proposal to me before class on February 12. I will either approve your proposal or ask you to submit a revised version by February 17. A complete draft of your paper including references is due February 24 (48 hours before class on February 26) for peer review. I recommend that you edit the paper after receiving feedback from your colleague and then take the revised version to RWIT for further assistance. The final version of your paper is due by 5 PM on March 5. The rubric that I will use to evaluate your work is provided at the end of the syllabus. (Failure to meet *any* of these deadlines will result in a reduced grade on the final paper.)

**Ideas for sources**

Possible academic sources:

• Google Scholar searches (regular or advanced search)

• Citations in a relevant article

• Citations to a relevant article (Google Scholar)
• Annual Review of Politics literature reviews

Historical, media, and polling data:

• Roper Center for Public Opinion Research
• The Policy Agendas Project
• The American Presidency Project
• Lexis Nexis Academic
  – Media coverage of the president/White House
  – Public Papers of the Presidents
• WhiteHouse.gov
• Huffington Post Pollster and PollingReport.com
• Morning Consult Intelligence

Course materials

No books are required for this course—all readings are available on Canvas unless otherwise noted.

Course schedule

The tentative schedule for the course is presented below. Please note that certain classes have been replaced with x-periods due to holidays and/or schedule conflicts. This course outline is subject to change; please consult the current version of the syllabus on Canvas for the most up-to-date information.

Introduction

The presidency and political change (1/4)


• Syllabus review

• Assignment: Take class survey (http://tuck.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_bvYEuIs7d7ZJawR)

Skill-building

Analytical writing (1/6)

• John Gerring, “General Advice on Social Science Writing”

• Stephen Van Evera, excerpt from Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science

• Tim Büthe, “Planning and Writing an Analytical Empirical Paper in Political Science”

• Assignment: Bring one-page excerpts of two previous analytical writing assignments with you to class (any subject but social science preferred)
  — One that you are proud of
  — One that you could improve on

Reading quantitative social science (1/8)

• William D. Berry and Mitchell S. Sanders (2000), Understanding Multivariate Research, 1–39, 45–49

• Abby Long (2015), “10 Things to Know About Reading a Regression Table”

• Hints on how to read and interpret regression tables (handout on Canvas)

The development and study of the presidency

The Constitution and the pre-modern presidency (1/11)


• U.S. Constitution (1789)

• Gene Healy (2009), The Cult of the Presidency, 32–46
The modern presidency (1/13)

- Healy (2009), Ch. 3
- Optional background reading: Milkis and Nelson (2012), 218–264, 288–350

The contemporary presidency (1/15)

- Healy (2009), Ch. 4, 145–149
- Optional background reading: Milkis and Nelson (2012), 351–485

Different approaches to the study of the presidency (1/20)


Analytical paper session I (1/21–x-period)

- Before class: Submit brief description of at least three possible topics of interest
- Discussion of assignment
- Pairs: Paraphrase of assignment; plans for improvement from short paper; brainstorming on topics
Interbranch relations: Congress and the courts

Divided government and gridlock (1/22)


Partisanship and Congress (1/25)


Enacting a legislative agenda (1/27)

- George C. Edwards III (2009), *The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership*, Ch. 4

Unilateral actions / midterm review (1/29)


Midterm 1 (2/1)

- Midterm course survey ([http://tuck.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_2tnRsnnSNLNXjL](http://tuck.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_2tnRsnnSNLNXjL)) must be submitted to take exam
Interactions with the courts (2/3)


The executive branch

Governing the executive branch (2/5)


- Joshua B. Kennedy (2015), “‘Do This! Do That! and Nothing Will Happen:’ Executive Orders and Bureaucratic Responsiveness,” *American Politics Research*


Analytical paper session II (2/8)

- Due before class: One-page summary proposal (including references)

- Discussion of proposals

- Pairs: Peer review

- Special guest: Hendrik Hertzberg (former Carter speechwriter and National Magazine Award-winning political essayist at the *The New Yorker*)

Foreign policy

Foreign policy and presidential power (2/10)


- Revised analytical paper proposal due (including references)
The role of domestic politics in foreign policy (2/12)


Accountability: The public, the press, and scandal

Understanding presidential approval (2/15)


- Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson (2002), *The Macro Polity*, Ch. 2

- Context: Gallup Presidential Job Approval Center (online, not on Canvas)

Are presidents responsive to public opinion? (2/17)

- Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson (2002), *The Macro Polity*, Ch. 8


Going public—how does the president do it? Does it work? (2/19)


- George C. Edwards III (2003), *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit*, Ch. 2

The president and the press (2/22)

- Samuel Kernell (2006), Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership (4th edition), Ch. 4

Presidential scandal (2/24)

- Robert Entman (2012), Scandal and Silence: Media Responses to Presidential Misconduct, Ch. 2

Analytical paper session III (2/26)

- Due 48 hours before class: Paper draft
- Due before class: One-page peer review (pairs)
  1. Using cut and paste (only!), provide answers to the questions for assignment
  2. Using the rubric criteria, identify at least two specific aspects of the paper that are especially strong and two that could be improved
  3. With the rubric criteria in mind, write at least three specific and constructive questions for the author that could help them think about how best to revise the paper
- Class discussion of paper progress
- Review and discussion of peer review responses

Presidential elections

The primaries (2/29)

- Context: Andrew Prokop (2015), “Political scientists think ‘the party’ will stop Trump. They shouldn’t be so sure,” Vox
The general election (3/2)

- Lynn Vavreck (2009), *The Message Matters: The Economy and Presidential Campaigns*, Ch. 3 and 67–75
- Alan I. Abramowitz (2008), “Forecasting the 2008 Presidential Election with the Time-for-Change Model,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*

Analytical paper working session (3/4)

- Finish your papers! I will be in the classroom and available for consultation if you would like to work there or ask questions (optional).

Wrapping up

Concluding discussion / midterm review (3/7)

- Assignment: Review your previous midterm

Midterm 2 (3/12 11:30 AM, location TBD)
Presidency midterm study guide

Syllabus description
There will be two closed-book midterms (25% each) covering half of the course. These exams will test your knowledge and understanding of the readings from that portion of the course. These may include multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, short answer questions, and/or brief essays. (Note: These will be curved! Don’t panic about your raw score.)

Exam details
- Each covers approximately half the class
- Closed-book; first held during class, second during final exam period
- Test conceptual knowledge and understanding of readings and lectures, not tiny details of individual articles or examples

Questions to consider for readings
- What is the authors’ main hypothesis?
- What is the theoretical mechanism that they believe would generate such an outcome?
- What is their general approach to testing their theory?
- What are their key results?
- How do their theories/results relate to those of other authors we read?

Sample questions from previous exams
1. (1 point) Compared to an agency created by Congress, which of these would Howell and Lewis expect for an agency created through executive action? (select all that apply)
   (A) A greater likelihood of reporting to the president
   (B) More stringent limits on personnel selection and replacement
   (C) A shorter life span
   (D) Larger budget

2. (2 points) Why do Black and Owens question the use of success rates to measure the influence of the Solicitor General on Supreme Court decisions? What implications does this argument have for the legislative success data cited by Edwards?
Short paper rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C/D/F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Demonstrates deep understanding of readings and relationships among them</td>
<td>Demonstrates acceptable understanding of readings, but some limits or errors</td>
<td>Demonstrates limited or no understanding of readings and relationships among them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>Applies several key concepts from readings to current events or historical cases</td>
<td>Successfully applies at least one concept from readings to current events or history</td>
<td>Implies one or more key concepts, but link to readings is missing or flawed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion/critique</td>
<td>Significant insight and creative discussion</td>
<td>Interesting, engaged discussion and critique</td>
<td>Shallow, flawed, or incorrect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of expression</td>
<td>Excellent grammar, vocabulary, and word choice</td>
<td>Some errors, imprecision, or room for improvement in writing</td>
<td>Awkward, imprecise, sloppy, or error-filled writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analytical paper rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C/D/F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis/argument</td>
<td>Clear, strong arguments that go beyond description, address important objections</td>
<td>Discernible arguments but not strong/clear enough or too much description</td>
<td>Unclear or weak arguments; mainly description or assertion; incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Originality</td>
<td>Especially creative new arguments, juxtaposing previously unrelated theories, or relating of facts to theories in new ways</td>
<td>Demonstrates some analytical originality in arguments, themes, and evidence covered; opportunities for greater creativity</td>
<td>Demonstrates little analytical originality, relies mainly on arguments and evidence covered in class or suggested by sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>Numerous, varied, and relevant details and facts provided in support of arguments</td>
<td>Details and facts support arguments, but more needed or some lacking relevance</td>
<td>Some details and facts to support arguments, but not enough and/or lack relevancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of course concepts</td>
<td>Excellent understanding of course concepts and insightful application to research topic</td>
<td>Conveys familiarity with course concepts; applies concepts to topic appropriately</td>
<td>Basic course concepts not applied appropriately; incorrect or incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Clear, logical organization that develops argument appropriately; does not stray off topic</td>
<td>Organization not totally clear; some digressions or lack of needed structure</td>
<td>Organization is unclear and/or paper strays substantially from agreed-upon topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of expression</td>
<td>Excellent grammar, vocabulary, and word choice</td>
<td>Some errors, imprecision, or room for improvement in writing</td>
<td>Awkward, imprecise, sloppy, or error-filled writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>