

POS3413 – The American Presidency
Professor Sean Freeder (sean.freeder@unf.edu)
University of North Florida, Spring 2021

Class Meetings: T/Th, 3:05–4:20: <https://unf.zoom.us/j/94222365635>

Office Hours: T/Th, 1:30–3:00 & 4:30–6:00, or by appointment. [Email for appt./zoom link](#)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The President of the United States has often been referred to as “the most powerful person in the world”. This course will explore the role that this office has played both in the world and throughout American history. In Unit 1, we will look at how and why the founders established the office of the presidency the way they did, and how the president’s powers and modes of interaction with the rest of the political system have changed over time. In Unit 2, we will look at the presidency from the perspective of the public, in terms of both presidential elections and the ways in which the presidency is shaped by public opinion and activism. In Unit 3, applying what we have learned thus far, we will take a historical look across American history to examine the role each president has played, and the legacy that they have left behind. We will conclude by looking at the modern presidencies, and the ways in which presidents will govern in the future. Throughout the course, we will apply what we are learning to the actions taken by the incoming Biden Administration.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Content

- Understanding the various powers held by the office of the presidency, how they have developed over time, and why.
- Understanding how the president interacts with other key political actors and institutions, such as Congress, the bureaucracy, the courts, and more.
- Understanding how the public is influenced by the president, and vice versa.
- Understanding how the president is nominated and elected, and how this changes.
- Understanding the historical role played by each individual president across history.

Critical Thinking

- Developing analytical abilities in determining the likelihood of the president taking various political actions.
- Evaluating the performance of the Biden Administration in the first 100 days.
- Learning how to analyze political performance from an objective, dispassionate lens.

Writing

- Developing writing skills for communicating clearly and effectively.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

The components of your grade are as follows:

Exam 1	15%
Exam 2	15%
Exam 3	15%
Essay	20%
Biden Project	20%
Weekly Responses	5%
Participation	10%

Each **Exam** will cover all material from a given Unit, and will consist of a combination of multiple choice, fill in the blank, and short answer questions. These exams may or may not contain one longer essay question. After these exams, you will generally have an opportunity to earn back a percentage of points missed by later completing corrections on your missed exam questions.

For the **Essay**, due electronically via Canvas on **March 2** by the start of class, you will write a 5-7 page paper evaluating the design of the institution of the presidency, answering the question “does the president have too much power?”. In this paper, you will consider both the powers granted to the president in the Constitution, as well as the powers the president has claimed over time. In addition to making this evaluation, you will also make suggestions for how the presidency could be designed to function better within the American system.

For the **Biden Project**, due electronically via Canvas on **April 19** by 5PM, you will use what you have learned throughout the course about the presidency generally, and the Biden administration specifically, to evaluate the successes and failures of Biden’s presidency in the first 100 days, and make predictions about what Biden will be likely to accomplish over the remainder of his presidency. Your evaluation may take one of several forms of your choosing – a 5-7 page paper, a documentary media presentation, or a podcast, for instance.

Weekly Responses will be made to a question I pose to the class based on the lecture/reading topics for that week. Responses should be 5-6 sentences long. These responses will be graded on a 0-2 scale; a score of 2 indicates an acceptable level of engagement with the question, 1 an insufficient response to the question, and 0 no response at all. This assignment is meant to only take a short amount of time each week, and will only help your grade if taken seriously.

Participation will be graded by two components – attendance and interaction. Your attendance will be taken automatically by grabbing from the Zoom roster – if it shows you as having attended 90% of the class minutes of a given day (allowing the possibility of minor technical difficulties), you will receive full credit for attendance that day. The other portion of the grade is determined by your level of involvement in class. This will primarily be determined by your level of activity in class discussions on Zoom, but I also consider meaningful interaction to include attendance of office hours with me, asking me questions via email, etc.

Grading Scale: 93 – 100 = A 83 – 86.99 = B 70 – 76.99 = C
90 – 92.99 = A- 80 – 82.99 = B- 60 – 69.99 = D
87 – 89.99 = B+ 77 – 79.99 = C+ Below 60 = F

Readings: On the schedule below, **readings are listed based on the day by which they are expected to be completed.** There are two required books: *The Presidency and the Political System, 11th edition* by Nelson, and *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* by Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck. In addition, I have included several supplementary readings, consisting of short journal articles and opinion pieces.

Course Policies:

- Academic dishonesty will automatically result in a zero on the relevant assignment, and may result in an F in the course and/or further academic punishment. Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating, plagiarism, and/or unauthorized collaboration. Plagiarism is defined as passing off someone else’s words as your own – parenthetical citations are your best friend in avoiding the accidental appearance of plagiarism. Academic dishonesty also includes, but is not limited to, providing false or misleading information to receive an extension on a test or assignment, or the submission of the same written assignment for two different courses. Assignments will be checked against existing online plagiarism databases before grading begins – if you plagiarize, you WILL be caught. If you have questions about proper citation, please feel free to ask, or consult the [Purdue Owl APA Style Guide](#). You may also read about the university’s policy on academic integrity [here](#), and about the university’s misconduct policy [here](#).
- Maintain civility in discussions with other students. Harassment will not be tolerated, including discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, age, sex, gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, national origin or veteran status. Passionate discussions are great and highly welcomed, but personal attacks and efforts to needlessly inflame discussions will not be permitted.
- Absences and tardiness may be excused only in the case of a medical or personal emergency, or an unavoidable scheduling conflict. In the case of the former, the absence will be excused only if accompanied by some form of documented evidence. In the case of the latter, please contact me as far in advance of the conflict as possible.
- Late work will be penalized by 5% for each day it is late. I am usually very willing to consider reasonable extension requests, but please contact me in advance if possible!
- I will consider re-grading requests, but only after 24 hours from the date the grade has been returned. Please note your grade could go higher *or* lower.
- In the case of substantial disruptions to our schedule due to COVID, hurricanes, etc., the format of the schedule may be subject to change, and we may attempt to find ways to make up the lost time. Though it will likely stay as is, the schedule on the syllabus may change slightly in terms of substance throughout the semester.

UNIT 1: THE PRESIDENCY AND ITS POWERS

January 7: Introduction (problematizing the presidency; introductions; syllabus)

- Stange, Niall. 2020. [“The five biggest challenges facing President-elect Biden.”](#) The Hill
- Bokot-Lindell, Spencer. 2020. [“How do we fix the American presidency?”](#) NYT.
- Complete [class entrance survey](#) (for 0.5% extra credit, January 11 by 5pm).

January 12: The President in the Constitution (historical development; powers, old and new)

- *The Presidency and the Political System*, Chapter 1.
- Bump, Philip. 2017. [“The president was never intended to be the most powerful part of government.”](#) Washington Post.

January 14: The President and the Bureaucracy (the Cabinet; key nominations; influence)

- *The Presidency and the Political System*, Chapter 14.
- Nadja Popovich, Livia Albeck-Ripka, and Kendra Pierre-Louis. 2020. [“The Trump administration is reversing more than 100 environmental rules. Here’s the full list.”](#) NYT.

January 19: The President and Congress 1 (early roles; the power to persuade)

- *The Presidency and the Political System*, Chapter 15.
- Fisher, Mark. 2017. [“Trump’s tools of persuasion – from tough talk to polite cajoling.”](#)

January 21: The President and Congress 2 (going public; unilateral action)

- *The Presidency and the Political System*, Chapter 17.
- Howell, Will and Moe, Terry. 2020. [“How a stronger presidency could lead to more effective government.”](#) Washington Post.

January 26: The President and the Courts (nominations; prominent legal conflicts)

- *The Presidency and the Political System*, Chapter 16.
- Shafer, Ronald. 2020. [“Adams chose a new chief justice just before leaving office. Jefferson was furious.”](#) Washington Post.

January 28: The President and Foreign Policy (conflicts with Congress; development)

- *The Presidency and the Political System*, Chapter 19.
- Masters, Jonathan. 2017. [“U.S. foreign policy powers: Congress and the president.”](#) Council on Foreign Relations.

February 2: The President and Impeachment (procedure for removal; historical incidents)

- *The Presidency and the Political System*, Chapter 20.
- Shafer, Ronald. 2019. [“‘Not above the law’: executive privilege’s contentious history from Washington to Trump.”](#) Washington Post.

February 4: Presidential Time (the relationship between presidents and their environment)

- *The Presidency and the Political System*, Chapter 3.

UNIT 2: THE PRESIDENCY AND THE PUBLIC

February 9: MIDTERM 1

February 11: Presidential Personality & Leadership (presidential characteristics and psychology; leadership styles; relationship w/ elites and masses)

- *The Presidency and the Political System*, Chapter 5.
- *The Presidency and the Political System*, Chapter 6.

February 16: Presidential Nominations 1 (early nominations processes; 20th century reforms; the 1968 Chicago Convention; McGovern-Fraser Reforms)

- *WATCH*: The Trial of the Chicago Seven, Netflix.

February 18: Presidential Nominations 2 (the modern nomination process; components of success; key primary elections)

- *The Presidency and the Political System*, Chapter 7.
- Freeder, Sean. 2020. "[The primary process is a disaster. Here's how we build a better one.](#)" Medium.

February 23: Presidential Elections (campaign events and effects; the electoral college)

- Sides and Vavreck. *Identity Crisis*. Pages 1-96.

February 25: The 2016 Election (an election case study)

- Sides and Vavreck. *Identity Crisis*. Pages 97-200.

March 2: The President and Public Opinion (public perceptions of the presidency; impact on presidential behavior; presidential influence)

- **PAPER 1 DUE**

March 4: The President and Organized Interests (relationship with organized interests)

- *The Presidency and the Political System*, Chapter 11.
- Livingston, Steven. 2017. "[John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Phone Call That Changed History](#)". Time.

March 9: MIDTERM 2

UNIT 3: THE PRESIDENCY AND HISTORY

March 11: Washington and the Early Founders. (1789-1808)

- Wulf, Karin. 2020. [“The president’s cabinet was an invention of America’s first president.”](#) Smithsonian Magazine.

March 16: Good Feelings, Bad Feelings, and Jackson (1808-1840)

- Inskeep, Steve. 2016. [“Donald Trump and the legacy of Andrew Jackson.”](#) The Atlantic.
- Gardner, John. 2020. [“A timely reminder of the era of good feelings.”](#) The Guardian.

March 18: The Lost Generation – Presidential Failure. (1840-1856)

- Horrocks, Thomas. [“Buchanan the peacemaker?”](#) Historynet.

March 23: Lincoln and the Reconstruction Presidents (1856-1876)

- Wertheimer, Linda. 2005. [“‘Team of rivals’: Lincoln’s political prowess.”](#) NPR.
- Maslin, Janet. 2017. [“In Ron Chernow’s ‘Grant’, an American giant’s makeover continues.”](#) New York Times.

March 25: The Gilded Age Presidents (1876-1900)

- Mayhew, David. 2016. [“What does McKinley’s election in 1896 teach us about today?”](#) Washington Post.
- Serratore, Angela. 2013. [“President Cleveland’s problem child.”](#) Smithsonian Magazine.

March 30: The Progressive Presidents (1900-1920)

- Conde, Arturo. 2020. [“Teddy Roosevelt’s racist and progressive legacy, historian says, is part of monument debate.”](#) NBC News.
- Lehr, Dick. 2015. [“The racist legacy of Woodrow Wilson.”](#) The Atlantic.

April 1: The Road to Ruin and FDR (1920-1940)

- Kilgore, Ed. 2020. [“Could Trump go the way of Herbert Hoover?”](#) New York Magazine.
- Matthews, Dylan. 2015. [“Secret love child aside, Warren Harding was a solid president.”](#) Vox.

April 6: FDR and the Postwar Presidents (1940-1963)

- Welky, David. 2020. [“FDR’s final speech has lessons for managing the coronavirus crisis.”](#) Washington Post.
- Ledbetter, James. 2017. [“How Eisenhower worked stealthily to rein in Joseph McCarthy.”](#) Washington Post.

April 8: *Nixon and Years of Crisis (1963-1980)*

- Zeitz, Joshua. 2018. "[What everyone gets wrong about LBJ's great society.](#)" Politico.
- Thomson-DeVeaux, Amelia. 2019. "[It took a long time for Republicans to abandon Nixon.](#)" FiveThirtyEight.
- Brands, H.W. 2015. "[You're remembering Reagan wrong.](#)" Time.

April 13: *The Reagan Revolution (1980-2000)*

- Purdum, Todd. 2000. "[Striking strengths, glaring failures.](#)" New York Times.
- Graybill, Andrew. 2020. "[Are we ready to rehabilitate George W. Bush's reputation?](#)" Texas Monthly.

April 15: *Bush, Obama, Trump and Beyond (2000-present)*

- Bloomberg News. 2017. "[Farewell to the chief: our columnists assess Obama's presidency.](#)" Bloomberg.
- Gregory Eady, Justin Vaughan, and Brandon Rottinghaus. 2018. "[Comparing Trump to the greatest – and the most polarizing – presidents in US history.](#)" Brookings.

April 19: PAPER 2 DUE

April 20: FINAL EXAM