

The University of Western Ontario
Department of History
HISTORY 2131A
The Presidency in American History
Fall 2021
Thurs. 2:30-4:30 pm
in SSC 2024

Instructor: Dr. Jeffery Vacante

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This is a draft syllabus. Please see your course OWL site for the final syllabus.

Course Description:

Examines the development of the modern presidency in terms of the challenges facing presidents and their success or failure in responding to the needs of the time. Special attention will be given to the evolution of presidential power and its historical consequences.

Course Syllabus:

The President of the United States is the single most influential figure within the American system of government. And yet, the Constitution gives the president very little formal power. Much of the president's power rests upon his "power to persuade," as Richard Neustadt so artfully put it, or as Theodore Roosevelt put it somewhat less artfully, on his ability to make use of his "bully pulpit." The president's power has thus become an expression not so much of what the constitution permits him to do as much as it is a reflection of what the Congress and the people are willing to tolerate. The presumed power of the presidency has only increased over the past century as public expectations about what the federal government should do have grown. As the perceived center of federal authority, these changing expectations have produced a much more powerful presidency than the one the founders had envisioned.

Debates over the role of the president and the scope of his powers are as old as the Republic, but the pre-eminent position that the president plays today within the political life of the nation is quite unlike the one envisioned by the nation's founders. The American Revolution had been fought in part, after all, against the perceived tyranny of a monarch, so when it came time to create the presidency, the founders were careful to create an office that they hoped would not reproduce the monarchy that they had just rejected. The founders thus inserted into the Constitution a number of checks to ensure that none of the

branches of government—the legislative, judicial, or executive—would dominate.

This course will trace the evolution of the office of the presidency from its early days, when the president played a less dominant role in the affairs of the nation, to the modern era, when the president serves as the face of the American state. It will explore the ways in which George Washington set the standard for what it meant to be president. It will consider the emergence of political parties, which would fundamentally alter what it meant to be president in a republic. It will consider Andrew Jackson's transformation of the office in the 1820s and 1830s, a time when the public's understanding of democracy was changing and when less deference was being shown to political leaders. It will consider the declining influence of the presidency during the Gilded Age as well as the growth of presidential power with the arrival of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson to the office. With the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the office of the presidency would assume its modern form, come to sit at the very center of the public consciousness, and would raise expectations about what the president should be doing. The expansion of presidential power during the first half of the twentieth century would lead to abuses of power during the second half of the century. The establishment of the national security state, the tragedy of the Vietnam War, the attempts to block the release of the Pentagon Papers, the dirty tricks at the heart of the Watergate affair, the efforts to curtail civil liberties following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and the rise of Donald Trump suggest that the presidency has strayed far from what many of the founders had intended.

In tracing the evolution of the office of the presidency, this course should allow students to understand the workings of power in the American political system and to assess various presidents within their historical perspectives.

In this course students will, in addition to learning the broad outline of the history of the American presidency, sharpen their ability to read and think critically, develop their analytical skills, and learn to organize and present their thoughts in the form of written examinations.

Course Materials:

All course readings will be made available online through the course owl page or placed on reserve at the Weldon Library.

Methods of Evaluation:

Midterm Examination 40%

Final Examination 60%

The expectation will be that students attend the lectures and complete all of the weekly readings. Students will also write a **midterm examination** in class on **October 7** as well as a **final examination** during the exam period in December.

Accommodation for missed tests/midterms, including Self Reported Absences (SRA):

Students with an approved absence from an in-class test will be required to write a makeup test.

Students should be aware that the make-up test will not necessarily be in the same format, be of the same duration, or cover the same material as the original test.

Online courses will have online makeup tests.

In person classes have scheduled makeup tests scheduled at the following times:

Fall Term

- Tests scheduled before November 1 – the makeup will take place November 8 at 9:30am.
- Tests scheduled between November 2 and December 7 – the makeup will take place December 8 at 9:30pm.

Winter Term

- Tests scheduled before February 19 – the makeup will take place February 28 at 9:30am.
- Tests scheduled between February 20 and March 31 – the makeup will take place April 1 at 12:30pm

No other make-up opportunities will be provided. Students who fail to write a makeup test in the designated time slots will receive a grade of zero.

Course professors may not be available to respond to questions during the makeup test slots.

Students should be aware that when they have submitted an SRA for one test, they are not permitted to write a test or complete an assignment for another course during the period covered by the SRA. Failure to observe this regulation will result in the cancellation of the SRA and the possible application of late penalties.

Accommodation for missed assignment deadlines with a Self Reported Absence:

If a student reports a SRA for an assignment (i.e. an essay) the new due date will be 48 hours after the SRA was submitted.

Course Schedule and Readings:

Sept. 9: Introduction

Sept. 16: Washington, January 6, 2021

- The Constitution
- *The Federalist* nos. 9, 10, 67, 68, 69, 70
- Jack N. Rakove, *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 244-287.

Sept. 23: The Presidency in the Early Republic

- Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 46-90.
- Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006 [1990]), 42-72.

Sept. 30: The Party System

- Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 619-622, 648-650, 669-683.

Oct. 7: Midterm Examination

Oct. 14: The Age of Jackson

- Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006 [1990]), 96-171.
- Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 3-19, 60-77, 172-175.
- Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005), 309-311, 312-314, 507-518.

Oct. 21: The Progressive Presidents: Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson

- John Morton Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 73-124.
- John Milton Cooper, Jr., *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 48-51, 206-221, 229-247.

Oct. 28: The Progressive Presidents II: Franklin Delano Roosevelt

- William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 26-37, 84-93 326-348

Nov. 4: Fall Break (Nov. 1-5)

Nov. 11: The Cold War Presidency

- James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 105-136, 210-215.
- K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-36.
- David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), 347-360, 361-362, 405-411, 421-429, 460-462, 512-533, 609-610, 655-658.

Nov. 18: The Sixties: John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson

- Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 159-175, 452-465, 466-483, 552-557, 558-570.
- Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 210-250.
- Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 377-419.

Nov. 25: Nixon, Reagan, and the Permanent Campaign

- Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 1992 [1961]), 7-44.
- Joe McGinnis, *The Selling of the President* (New York: Penguin, 1988 [1969]), 26-40, 62-63, 190-198.
- Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 50-64, 143-171, 172-185, 792-795.
- Joan Didion, "The Lion King," *New York Review of Books* (December 18, 1997), reprinted in Didion, *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 789-806.

Dec. 2: Conclusion

Use of Electronic Devices:

The use of electronic devices during examinations is not permitted.

Additional Statements:

Please review the Department of History Course Must-Knows document, <https://www.history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/Docs/Department%20of%20History%20Course%20Must-Knows.pdf>, for additional information regarding:

- Academic Offences
- Accessibility Options
- Medical Issues
- Plagiarism
- Scholastic Offences
- Copyright
- Health and Wellness