The President of the United States is the most powerful office in American government. It is the focal point of political leadership in the nation and, in many respects, in the world. It is an office with a wide range of responsibilities. Noted presidential scholar Clinton Rossiter (1956) in his classic study, *The American Presidency*, wrote of the president wearing a number of hats. These included being the symbolic head of state, the chief executive in the enforcement of laws, commander in chief of the armed forces, chief diplomat in foreign relations, chief legislator in the making of laws, leader of his or her political party, protector of the peace in times of national emergencies, manager of prosperity, world leader, and the nation’s chief political leader. The president has a major responsibility in dealing with every area of public policy and the processes for their development and implementation. President Harry Truman put the president’s job more succinctly when he placed a sign on his oval office desk that read: “The Buck Stops Here!” The purpose of this seminar is to increase your understanding of the presidency, how presidents have governed and represent Americans by critically examining important scholarship on the subject, and why some presidents have been considered more successful leaders than others.

There are three sections to this course. The first section covers two classic studies of the presidency—Neustadt’s *Presidential Power and the Modern President*, a study generally regarded by presidential scholars as a benchmark study, comparable in impact to *The American Voter* study in the field of voting behavior research, and Skowronek’s *The Politics Presidents Make*, a more recent study that is highly regarded by presidential scholars and widely cited in this field.

The second section of the course considers four studies and a new collection of studies that examine various aspects of the presidency with a particular focus of how the president influences and represents the public and his party. In this part of the course we will read and discuss two books by renowned presidential scholar George Edwards. These are his 2009 book entitled *The Strategic President* and his 2006 book *On Deaf Ears*. This will be followed by a consideration of Brandice Canes-Wrones’ 2005 book entitled *Who Leads Whom*? and Dan Woods’ *The Myth of Presidential Representation*. Finally, we will read a collection of articles just published on *The Obama Presidency* by a distinguished array of presidential and American politics scholars.
The third section of the course examines in some depth a topic of particular interest to me and concerns a recent project of mine. The subject is the rating of presidents. Since the 1940s, presidential scholars in history and political science as well as journalists have attempted to rank the presidents in terms of their overall achievements or “greatness.” We will read several of these studies and studies that attempt to determine what factors are associated with presidents being rated great, near-great, average, or failures. While this exercise might be dismissed as comparing “apples and oranges” or superficial entertainment, every president is evaluated and comparisons to other presidents are an unavoidable and helpful aspect in arriving at these evaluations. Presidents can only reasonably be compared to what is achievable rather than perfection and the comparisons to what other presidents have achieved is very useful in this regard. This line of research is also instructive in revealing what kinds of achievements, what aspects or types of presidencies, are most highly valued and admired.

**Background Materials**

There are several excellent overview books, websites, and documentaries on the American Presidency. Below are several that you should peruse:

Three expansive websites with many links to useful sources are:

2. The Presidency Research Group at [http://cstl-cla.semo.edu/renka/prg/](http://cstl-cla.semo.edu/renka/prg/), and

Two websites with a good deal of basic history of the presidents (though you should not necessarily believe everything you read in these) are:

2. The Miller Center at the University of Virginia at [http://millercenter.org/president](http://millercenter.org/president)

Two very useful websites for presidential approval ratings are:

1. The Roper Center at the University of Connecticut at [http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/](http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/)
Among the general historical books on the presidency that you may want to consult are:
(1.) Alan Brinkley and Davis Dyer (editors), 2004. *The American Presidency*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), and

There are several interesting documentaries on the American presidency and on individual presidents (e.g., HBO’s *John Adams* based on David McCullough’s Pulitzer Prize winning book). One good overview documentary is the History Channel’s “The Presidents: The Lives and Legacies of the 43 Leaders of the United States.” It ranges from George Washington to George W. Bush. It is available as a three dvd set.

Last, but definitely not least, you should at some point read Article II of the U.S. Constitution that created the office of the presidency. You should also read Madison, Hamilton, and Jay’s Federalist Papers that concern the presidency. They explanation of the political theory that motivated the design of the office. The pertinent papers are the eleven papers from Federalist #67 to Federalist #77. Each of these papers are suspected to have been written by Alexander Hamilton.

**Grades**

Your grade will be based equally on two components. The first is the quality of your participation in the seminar discussions. Intelligent and insightful comments and questions will be rewarded. Confused ramblings or stony-silence will not be. The second component is your research paper.

**1. Expected Participation**

You are expected to have done the assigned reading, to have thought about it, and to participate actively in the seminar discussions. Each student will be assigned to be a discussion leader for two weeks. Depending on the final number of students in the class, there may be more than one discussion leader for a meeting. For the meetings in which you are the discussion leader you should be especially well versed about the week's reading and should help direct the class discussion, either through questions or comments designed to provoke further analysis of the reading, its methodological soundness, its theoretical contribution, its general importance, and implications for other research. While you have somewhat greater responsibility to help lead the discussion in weeks in which you are a discussion leader, every student is expected to participate actively in each seminar meeting.

**2. Research Paper**

The second part of your course grade will be based on a research paper written for the course. In the first three or four weeks of class, you should identify a research question (why X or what is the effect of X on Y?) and identify how (what specific data and methods) you will answer the question. The question must concern the presidency and, if you have questions about that,
you should ask me. You might look to recent volumes of professional journals, especially Presidential Studies Quarterly, to generate some ideas. The end product research paper should be in the form of a paper that could be presented at a professional political science meeting. That is, it should be professional in form (citations, tables, references, etc.) as well as in rigorous analysis and content. Again, if you have questions, ask. You should use papers presented at conferences as a template for your paper. Students will give brief presentations of their papers in the last meeting of the seminar which will be held when the final exam otherwise would have been held.

Books
There are nine books ordered for this course. In order of appearance, they are:


Class Assignments (and Discussion Leaders)

**Week 1. August 31**
No Class. American Political Science Association meeting.

**Week 2. September 7** (Bauer and Kinderman)

**Week 3. September 14** (Boston and Lines)

**Week 4. September 21** (Blackley and Kotlewski)

**Week 5. September 28**
No Class, Rosh Hashanah

**Week 6. October 5** (Bryant and Ryan)

**Week 7. October 12** (Hanson and Young)

**Week 8. October 19** (Kujawa and O’Connell)

**Week 9. October 26** (Bauer and Ryan)

**Week 10. November 2** (Boston and Kotlewski)

**Week 11. November 9** (Blackley and Lines)
Readings


**Week 12. November 16** (Bryant and Kinderman)
Read: James Taranto and Leonard Leo (editors), *Presidential Leadership: Rating the Best and the Worst in the White House*.

**Week 13. November 23**
No Class. Fall Recess. To the non-PC crowd, this is better known as Thanksgiving

**Week 14. November 30** (Hanson and O’Connell)
Read: Alvin S. Felzenberg, *The Leaders We Deserved (and a Few We Didn’t): Rethinking the Presidential Rating Game*.

**Week 15. December 7** (Kujawa and Young)
Readings


**Week 16. Exam Week. December 14.**

Paper presentations.