

POLS 302: The American Presidency
Occidental College
Updated March 28, 2025

Spring Semester, 2025
Monday and Wednesday
4:05-5:30 PM
Room: Johnson 104

Instructor: Dr. Isaac Hale
Email: halei@oxy.edu
Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday: 10:00-11:00 AM
Office: Johnson Hall 308

Course Description

What is the American presidency? Is it a person? A branch of government? An institution with powers and constraints? The answer to all these questions is “yes”! Who the president is matters a lot: they control most of the federal bureaucracy, control most federal appointments, appoint judges, and have massive discretion over foreign policy. However, the presidency is also bigger than one individual: the office has changed significantly over time, both in terms of its powers and its constraints. In this class we will focus on the presidency at both an individual and institutional level. We will examine: 1) presidential nominations, 2) presidential elections, 3) presidential powers, and 4) the institutional presidency. We will look at how each of these facets of the presidency has evolved over time and how they manifest in modern presidential politics. The 2024 election and the Trump and Biden presidencies will be central to this course.

Since this is an upper division course, it is my expectation that you have a baseline knowledge of the structure of American government. As such, we will not be devoting much time in class to basic civics (e.g., checks and balances, the three branches of government, etc.). If you do not feel comfortable with these subjects, I highly encourage you to brush up at the beginning of the semester and come to my office hours if you have questions.

One final note – this course is meant to be fun! While the material in this class will often get into the weeds of the presidency, I will endeavor to make sure our discussions are relevant to current political events. If there is something happening in the news that is relevant to our class, I will be sure to allocate time to discuss it. I encourage you to apply current events to course material in class discussion as well. Cabinet appointments, major legislation, scandals, executive orders, and policy debates are all fair game!

Course Objectives

The student learning outcomes for this course are as follows:

- Gain an understanding on the constitutional design of the American presidency
- Learn about how the presidency has evolved as an institution over time
- Interrogate whether the modern presidency is weak or strong, both comparatively and historically
- Critically assess whether the modern presidency is performing in a normatively desirable way

- Assess how presidential nominations and elections shape both the kinds of presidents that emerge and the incentives of the office
- Improve oral presentation skills by leading class discussion on complex readings in a way that stimulates discussion
- Apply knowledge from the class to contemporary political events, including the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections
- Produce a final paper that demonstrates a mastery of the topics covered in this course

Required Texts

There is a required book for this course.

- Textbook: William G. Howell, *The American Presidency: An Institutional Approach to Executive Politics*. 2023. Princeton University Press.
 - ISBN: 9780691225579

You may access all other readings through the Canvas portal for this class or via hyperlinks in the syllabus.

Core Program Requirements

POLS 302 fulfills a U.S. Diversity (CPUD) core program requirement.

Class Expectations

Credit Hour Policy

POLS 302 is a 4-unit course. On average, you should expect to spend at least twelve (12) hours a week (including in-class time) on this course.

Lecture Slides

Slides will be used in class on most days. Slides will be posted to Canvas following the class session.

Online Access

All readings and documents for this course can be accessed through the Canvas website or via hyperlinks in the syllabus schedule. Messages will be sent by me via Canvas, so make sure you have email notifications for Canvas messages activated.

Email

I welcome questions and comments by email. When you email me, you should compose your email as you would any piece of professional correspondence. I will respond to your emails as quickly as possible, but please do not expect a quick response to email sent on weekends or after 5pm on any day.

Laptops and Other Electronics

Generally speaking, laptops are not allowed in class. [Numerous studies confirm that](#) students who take notes by hand retain more information over time and that laptop bans improve student engagement in smaller classes. It is also far less distracting to others when there is no typing and visual distraction going on during a lecture/discussion. As such, laptops, phones, and other electronic devices are not allowed in class.

If you have a documented learning disability that is helped by typing your notes, contact me and I will be happy to consider an exception. Furthermore, if you have a very compelling reason why you strongly prefer to take notes during lecture with a laptop, you may write me an email letting me know, and we can discuss the matter individually. Any laptops approved for use in-class must not be used for web surfing during class.

You may bring an e-reader, tablet, or another “lie-flat” device to access readings in class. You may not use it for tasks such as surfing the web or email. You are encouraged to bring printouts or e-reader copies of the readings to class.

Desk Name Tag (yes, this is required)

To facilitate discussion, I ask that you place a name tag on the desk in front of you in class each day. Although attendance will not be taken, showing up to class with your desk name tag will affect your participation grade. One way to make this name tag is to take an 8½ x 11-inch piece of construction paper or lightweight cardboard, fold it in half lengthwise (so it’s now 4¼ x 11 inches), and write your name on one side so that your name is upright when you put the folded piece of paper like a tent on the desk in front of you. Please write your full name (**FIRST AND LAST**—using whatever name you prefer to be called as your first name) in **LARGE, VERY DARK, BOLD** letters. I will bring nametag supplies on the first day of class.

Grading

Grading for this course will be calculated as follows:

Participation	10%
Annotated Bibliography	10%
Analytic Essay	40%
<u>Quizzes (best 8 out of 10)</u>	<u>40%</u>
Total:	100%

The final letter grade will be assigned according to the standard table:

93-100: A	87-89: B+	77-79: C+	67-69: D+
90-92: A-	83-86: B	73-76: C	60-66: D
	80-82: B-	70-72: C-	00-59: F

If you are 0.5 points or less from the next letter grade at the end of the course, the grade submitted to the registrar will be rounded up to the next letter grade. You will not be able to see this rounding on Canvas.

All graded items listed above are detailed in the sections that follow.

Participation

Your participation grade will be based on the overall effort you put into the class, including the effort you put into your assignments, your attendance in class (and having a desk tag!), and your participation in discussions. Come to class, participate in class discussions, earn a good participation grade, and get more out of the class. It’s a win-win. You are also encouraged to bring up news stories, relevant examples, and “dank” presidency memes.

Annotated Bibliography

In advance of your final paper, you will be asked to submit an annotated bibliography. This will be of great assistance to you as you write the analytic essay. The annotated bibliography will include 5-6 **scholarly** sources (peer-reviewed articles, books, book chapters, etc.); I suggest using APA formatting for each citation, but any consistent formatting (e.g., Chicago, MLA, APSR, etc.) is fine.

For each source, provide the full citation for the source, followed by 4-5 sentences summarizing how the source fits into your paper and advances your argument. The following questions may help guide you:

- What is the topic of the paper/book?
- What are the key variables?
- What sort of data and methods are used?
- What are the most important results, and how does the author interpret the results?

A rubric is posted on Canvas. The annotated bibliography is due on April 11th, at midnight (11:59 PM).

Analytic Essay

In lieu of a final exam, you are required to submit an analytic essay for this class. Make sure to use 12-point font, one-inch margins, **single-spacing**, and proper citation format. Additionally, please number each page. The essay should be **five-six pages long** (and should certainly not exceed seven). This page limit does not include a bibliography, which should be at the end of your paper.

Essays will be graded on content (evidence provided), analysis (claims drawn about the evidence provided), structure (clarity of thesis and logical “flow” of the essay), and mechanics (grammar, punctuation use, sentence and paragraph composition, etc.). The following elements are part of an A paper:

1. **A clear thesis** presented in the first paragraph and argued throughout. Include “In this essay I will argue that...” or something similar.
2. **Evidence to support your thesis** in the form of facts, ideas from existing research, and thoughtful, balanced analysis.
3. **Clear structure**, including an introduction, a conclusion, and reasonably sized body paragraphs. Each body paragraph should start with a topic sentence that introduces that paragraph.
4. **A bibliography** with a complete list of your sources. Some guidelines:
 - Include a **minimum of ten (10)** sources total.
 - At least **six (6) academic sources** for each paper. These should be *academic articles* or *university press books*.
 - At least three of your six academic sources must be from outside the class (meaning that it is not on the syllabus).
 - Google Scholar can be very useful for finding sources
 - Lectures and the textbook may be cited, but do **not** count towards your required sources.
5. **Appropriate and sparing use of quotes.** Quotes do not speak for themselves. They should always be preceded by context and followed by analysis of that quote.
6. **Clear writing** with few grammatical errors.

Essay prompts will be posted on Canvas. The essay is due on the scheduled final exam day (Wednesday, May 7th), at midnight (11:59 PM).

Quizzes

Ten short answer/multiple choice quizzes will be administered over the course of the quarter. The lowest two quiz grades will be dropped. Quizzes will take place at the beginning of class on Wednesdays. Quizzes will be graded out of five points each.

There will be a quiz every Wednesday EXCEPT:

- January 22nd (first week of classes)
- February 19th (week of Presidents' Day)
- March 13th (Spring Break)
- April 16th (Professor Hale travelling to WPSA)

Everything is fair game! Quizzes may cover two kinds of information:

- 1) Material from the assigned readings, even if we do not discuss it in class.
- 2) Material discussed in class, even if it is not covered in the readings.

Since you may miss or drop two quizzes, no make-up quizzes will be offered. For the same reason there is no need to inform me if you will miss a quiz. All quizzes will be graded out of 5 points. Each quiz (not including the dropped quizzes) will be worth 5% of your final grade.

Extra Credit Meme

You may earn extra credit by creating and submitting a meme related to course content. The extra credit is worth up to one point on your final grade (e.g., raising an 89% final grade to a 90%). In order to receive full credit, the meme must be used correctly! I suggest using <https://knowyourmeme.com> to make sure you are using your meme correctly. You can create memes using meme generators such as <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>. Your meme will be shared in class, so be creative!

- The meme is due Friday, April 25th at 11:59 PM

Late Submissions

Do not wait until the night before it is due to begin to work on an assignment. Life is complicated and full of unexpected surprises. Plan for uncertainty by managing your time efficiently. Even if your work is not complete because something unexpected interfered, submit what you have accomplished prior to the emergency. After-the-fact extensions will be granted only under extreme circumstances, and at my sole discretion.

If you know in advance that you will miss an assignment deadline, you may submit a partially completed assignment early — and then appeal for an extension.

Assignments submitted late will have 10% deducted from their final score for every day they are late. This penalty begins immediately following the day and time the assignment is due and will not be prorated. Late reading briefs will not be accepted after the class where the reading is assigned. Due to grade submission deadlines, no late assignments will be accepted after 11:59 PM on Sunday, May 12th.

Grade Appeals

If you are not satisfied with the grade you receive on an assignment, please take the following steps:

- 1) Review any comments/feedback I have provided. Check your Canvas submission.
- 2) If you still have questions, come to my office hours, or contact me by email.
- 3) If you still believe the grade you received is in error, submit a one-paragraph written request for a regrade by email. If the request is approved, your work will receive a completely new evaluation by me. Your score may increase, decrease, or stay the same.

Disabilities

Occidental College (Oxy) complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 as amended, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended, and other applicable state and federal law prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities.

- All accommodation requests including academic, housing (ESA & Service Animal) and temporary accommodations are managed by the Disability Services Office. It is a student's responsibility to request accommodations via the [Disability Services](#) website. For information about additional accommodations and support services, students can email accessibility@oxy.edu.
- Oxy's Psychological Testing Program: We offer low cost psychological testing for students who qualify. Any student who thinks they may have a learning, or psychological disability may contact Disability Services at accessibility@oxy.edu to learn more about psychological testing.
- Academic Success Coaching: Disability Services offers Academic Success Coaching for all students who struggle with organization, time management, etc. Please contact accessibility@oxy.edu for more information.

Academic Dishonesty

Academic Integrity is a shared community value. It is built around trust and respect between members of the Occidental Community and embodies a commitment to honesty and integrity in every aspect of one's academic life.

All members of the Occidental community are committed to uphold the highest degree of academic integrity. Unless stipulated otherwise, the academic work done for all assignments is expected to be the student's own; students are expected to give proper credit to the ideas and work of others.

Generally speaking, you must cite the person at the end of the sentence in which you use another person's idea. When you use a specific phrase, you must put that phrase in quotation marks and cite the original author at the end of the sentence in which you use the phrase. If you wish to submit a piece of writing that you have used in another class, you must receive my permission before doing so.

Good writing is good thinking. Figuring out which words best express your ideas is central to the writing process. As such, I do not allow AI to be used in your writing for this class. This includes (but is not limited) to translation sites, ChatGPT, Deepseek, Apple Rewrite, and/or any platform that "generates" language and/or ideas. Any generative AI use for writing assignments in this class is a violation of the College's Academic Integrity Policy. Instead of AI tools, utilize Oxy's writing support services for help with drafts and revisions

Signing the Academic Integrity Commitment at the beginning of every semester represents a student's affirmation to uphold the shared values of honesty and integrity. When signing the Integrity Commitment associated with work in a course, students are affirming that they have not cheated, plagiarized, fabricated, or falsified information; nor assisted others in these actions.

Refer to [Student Handbook](#) for the framing of the commitment, definitions of Academic Ethics, and Process for alleged violations of the commitment.

Support Services

There are a number of opportunities for **academic support**. Please visit the following website at <https://www.oxy.edu/academics/student-success> to see the variety of services offered, including writing support, tutoring, research assistance, language tutoring, and academic coaching.

The Emmons Wellness Center provides **medical services and counseling**. Visit their website for information on specific services provided: <https://www.oxy.edu/student-life/resources-support/emmons-wellness-center>

Accommodations for Reasons of Faith and Conscience

Consistent with Occidental College's commitment to creating an academic community that is respectful of and welcoming to persons of differing backgrounds, we believe that students should be excused from class for reasons of faith and conscience without academic consequence. While it is not feasible to schedule coursework around all days of conviction for a class as a whole, faculty will honor requests from individual students to reschedule coursework, to be absent from classes that conflict with the identified days. Information about this process is available on the ORSL website: <https://www.oxy.edu/student-life/resources-support/orsl/academic-accommodations>

Sexual Harassment and Assault Resources

In the event that you write or speak about having experienced discrimination or harassment on the basis of a protected characteristic or sexual misconduct (including sexual assault, dating/domestic violence, stalking, sexual exploitation or any other form of sexual and/or gender-based harassment), as a designated Responsible Employee, I must inform the Civil Rights & Title IX Office. They will contact you to let you know about resources and support services at Oxy, as well as reporting options both on and off-campus. You have no obligation to respond to the Civil Rights & Title IX Office or to meet with them to discuss support services and reporting options.

If you do not want the Civil Rights & Title IX Office contacted, instead of disclosing this information to your instructor, either through conversation or a class assignment, you can speak confidentially with:

- Oxy's Survivor Advocate, Project SAFE (survivoradvocate@oxy.edu)
- Emmons Counseling (For appointments, call: 323-259-2657)
- Rev. Dr. Susan Young, Office of Religious and Spiritual Life (myoung@oxy.edu)
- Oxy 24/7 Confidential Hotline (323-341-4141)

The College's civil rights policies, along with additional resources, can be found at: <https://www.oxy.edu/civil-rights-title-ix>. If you would like to contact the Civil Rights & Title IX Office directly, you may email Civil Rights & Title IX Coordinator Alexandra Fulcher at afulcher@oxy.edu or call 323-259-1338.

Weekly Topics & Readings

The list below indicates reading assignments and class topics. All readings are in the textbook, available on Canvas, or hyperlinked below. You should do each day's readings before that day's class. I will generally keep us on schedule but note that discussions may bleed over from one class to the next.

Date	Topics	Readings Due
Week 1		
Wed, Jan 22	Course Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read the syllabus! Howell, Introduction (pages 1-15) Theodore Schleifer. 2024. "Trump Plans Series of Executive Orders for Day 1, Susie Wiles Tells Donors." <i>The New York Times</i>. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alternate link here
Week 2		
Mon, Jan 27	The Constitutional Origins of Presidential Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Article II of the U.S. Constitution: https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/article/article-ii Howell, Constitutional Origins (pages 19-51)
Wed, Jan 29	The Institutional Presidency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell, The Ascendancy of an Institutional Presidency (pages 56-81) Howell, The Modern Institutional Presidency (pages 85-105)
Week 3		
Mon, Feb 3	The Nomination Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell, The Nomination of Presidential Candidates (pages 135-169)
Wed, Feb 5	The Nomination Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CANVAS: John Sides, Michael Tesler, & Lynn Vavreck. 2018. Hunting where the ducks are: Activating support for Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican primary. <i>Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties</i>, 28(2), 135-156. EXPLORE: <i>FiveThirtyEight</i> 2016 endorsement tracker: https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2016-endorsement-primary/ EXPLORE: <i>FiveThirtyEight</i> 2020 endorsement tracker: https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2020-endorsements/democratic-primary/ EXPLORE: <i>FiveThirtyEight</i> 2024 endorsement tracker: https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2024-election-endorsements/

Week 4		
Mon, Feb 10	Examining Recent Primaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Christal Hayes. 2024. “Pelosi blames Biden for election loss as finger pointing intensifies.” <i>BBC News</i>. Matt Dixon. 2024. “Trump's win maintains his hold on the GOP. It also kicks off plans for a succession.” <i>NBC News</i>. Natasha Korecki. 2024. “Democrats are already looking to revamp their early state primary calendar for 2028.” <i>NBC News</i>. Geoffrey Skelley. 2022. “What Democrats' New Primary Calendar Could Look Like.” <i>FiveThirtyEight</i> Allan Smith, Natasha Korecki and Alex Seitz-Wald. 2024. “Democratic jockeying for the 2028 presidential election is already underway.” <i>NBC News</i>
Wed, Feb 12	Presidential Elections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell, General Elections (pages 175--212)
Week 5		
Mon, Feb 17	President's Day – NO CLASS	
Wed, Feb 19	Rethinking Electoral Institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> David Weigel. 2016. “How do other countries elect presidents without an electoral college? Pretty easily.” <i>The Washington Post</i>. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alternate link here Podcast, <i>Politics In Question</i>. 2019. Episode: “Should the Electoral College be abolished?”
Week 6		
Mon, Feb 24	Modern Presidential Campaigns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CANVAS: selection from Lynn Vavreck. 2009. <i>The Message Matters</i>. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. CANVAS: Erikson, Robert S. 2009. “The American Voter and the Economy, 2008.” <i>PS: Political Science and Politics</i> 42(3): 467-471
Wed, Feb 26	Presidential Election Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CANVAS: Philippe Mongrain and May Stegmaier. 2024. “Introduction to Forecasting the 2024 US Elections.” <i>PS: Political Science and Politics</i> “How the Economist's presidential forecast works” <i>The Economist</i>. 2024.

Week 7		
Mon, Mar 3	Case Study: the 2016 Election	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CANVAS: John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck. "The 2016 U.S. Election: How Trump Lost and Won." <i>Journal of Democracy</i> 28, no. 2 (2017): 34-44. Nate Silver. 2017. "The Real Story of 2016." <i>FiveThirtyEight</i>
Wed, Mar 5	The President & the Legislative Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell, Relations with Congress (pages 249-293) Julia Azari. 2017. "Trump Came in as a Weak President, He's Made Himself Weaker." <i>FiveThirtyEight</i>.
Week 8		
SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS		
Week 9		
Mon, Mar 17	The President & the Legislative Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell, Power and the Institutional Presidency (pages 109-128)
Wed, Mar 19	The Pivotal Politics Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CANVAS: Walter J. Stone and James A. McCann. 2021. <i>Republic at Risk: An Introduction to American Politics</i>. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 7: "A Pivotal Politics Model of the Policy Process"
Week 10		
Mon, Mar 24	The Unilateral Presidency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell, Unilateral Powers (pages 300-341) Podcast, <i>Civics 101</i>. 2025. Episode: "What are Executive Orders?"
Wed, Mar 26	The Unilateral Presidency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CANVAS: Thrower, Sharece. 2017. "To Revoke or Not Revoke: The Political Determinants of Executive Order Longevity." <i>American Journal of Political Science</i>.
Week 11		
Mon, Mar 31	The President & the Judiciary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Howell, Relations with the Federal Judiciary (pages 376-410)
Wed, Apr 2	The President & the Judiciary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Podcast, <i>The Ezra Klein Show</i>. 2024. Episode: "‘A Sword and a Shield’: How the Supreme Court Supercharged Trump’s Power."

Week 12		
Mon, Apr 7	The President, the Public, and the Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Howell, Public Opinion (pages 453-475) • CANVAS: Brandice Canes-Wrone and Kenneth W. Shotts. 2004. "The Conditional Nature of Presidential Responsiveness to Public Opinion." <i>American Journal of Political Science</i>. 48(4): 690-706.
Wed, Apr 9	The Bush & Obama White Houses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CANVAS: James Pfiffner. 2009. "The Contemporary Presidency: Decision Making in the Bush White House." <i>Presidential Studies Quarterly</i> 39(2): 363-384. • CANVAS: James Pfiffner. 2011. "Decision Making in the Obama White House." <i>Presidential Studies Quarterly</i> 41(2): 244-262.
Week 13		
Mon, Apr 14	The Trump (1) & Biden White Houses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CANVAS: James Pfiffner. 2018. "The Contemporary Presidency: Organizing the Trump Presidency." <i>Presidential Studies Quarterly</i> 48(1): 153-167. • CANVAS: James Pfiffner. 2021. "Organizing the Biden Presidency." <i>Presidential Studies Quarterly</i> 51(4): 818-838. • Annie Linskey, Rebecca Ballhaus, Emily Glazer, and Siobahn Hughes. 2024. "How the White House Functioned With a Diminished Biden in Charge." <i>The Wall Street Journal</i>. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Alternate link here
Wed Apr 16	NO CLASS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professor Hale will be at the Western Political Science Association meeting in Seattle

Week 14		
Mon, Apr 21	<p>The Future of the American Presidency & Presidential Legacies</p> <p>QUIZ DAY</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elizabeth Goitein. 2017. “The Dangerous Powers Obama Left in Trump’s Hands.” <i>Fortune</i>. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alternate link here Andrew Rudalevige. 2018. “As a candidate, Trump criticized Obama's use of executive power. So guess what powers President Trump has been leaning on?” <i>The Washington Post</i>. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alternate link here Jordan Cash. 2024. “Biden, like Trump, sidesteps Congress to get things done.” <i>The Conversation</i>. CANVAS: Brandon Rottinghaus & Justin S. Vaughn. 2024. “Official Results of the 2024 Presidential Greatness Project Expert Survey.”
Wed, Apr 23	<p>Reevaluating Checks & Balances in the Trump Era</p> <p>Campus event with Nicholas G. Napolio (UC Riverside)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choi Auditorium at 2:00 PM – 3:15 PM This event will take place <u>instead</u> of normal class You will receive 1 point of extra credit for attending <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You <u>must</u> sign in to receive extra credit
Week 15		
Mon, Apr 28	IN CLASS: Presidency Jeopardy & Snacks!	