

Dr. Thad Williamson, Jepson Hall 132

Class Meeting Time: Mondays and Wednesdays, 10:30-11:45, Jepson Hall 102.

Email: twillia9@richmond.edu

Office Hours: Wednesdays, 3:15-4:15 p.m. and by appointment.

Understanding Politics as an Activity

The primary purpose of this class is to explore the nature of *politics* as a distinct human activity and a distinctive context in which leadership is exercised. Embedded in this broad goal are numerous distinct questions:

- How is power exercised in the context of democratic societies?
- What specific techniques do leaders use to obtain, maintain, increase power?
- Under what circumstances can politics be an instrument for promoting the public good and advancing racial and social justice?
- How does the use of political power affect those who hold it?

These questions will be explored within the specific setting of the contemporary United States. American democracy is widely described as being in crisis, with an uncertain future. This is manifested in the sharp drop of trust of American citizens in government and its capacities; in widening economic inequalities and inequalities of political influence; and perceived and actual long-term damage to political institutions and constitutional norms over the past decade. The first part of the course thus focuses primarily on presidential-level leadership in the United States from Richard Nixon to Joe Biden, with an emphasis on *governance and policy*, not simply electoral results. Focal points include (but are not limited to):

- Understanding the role and workings of the modern presidency and executive branch in U.S. history
- Understanding the relationship between the executive, legislative and judicial branches
- Understanding the impact of presidential-level leadership on major recurring policy matters including economic security, economic inequality, racial equity, as well as foreign policy and international affairs
- Understanding the continued legacy of America's history of racial domination and exclusion on American political life
- Understanding the changing role of money in politics over the past half-century
- Understanding the role of individual political personalities and of "fateful choices" in driving outcomes
- Assessing the disconnect between national politics and growing discontent with American democratic institutions, and considering whether the presidency has become a failed institution

In the final section of the course, we will pivot to consider **local** politics, both as a site of democratic political leadership very different in tone and substance from national political leadership, and as potential site of democratic renewal and redress of our governance failures.

In short, in this course we will consider fundamental questions concerning leadership, the nature of democratic systems, the relationship between political processes and policy outcomes, and the nature of the American political system. Drawing largely on narrative materials (memoir, journalistic accounts, historical scholarship), we will seek to come to terms with the current condition of American political institutions.

In many Jepson courses, an implicit goal is for students to develop a view about the “world as it should be.” That is a worthy goal. In this class, however, our primary concern is not understanding politics as it should be but as it actually is. A realistic assessment of political leadership is a precondition for fruitful thinking about how politics might be improved.

General Requirements and Expectations

This is a reading-intensive course. It is expected students will come to every class prepared to talk about the assigned reading for the date. Some of the texts in the class are dense and packed with information. But these readings are also engaging and at times feature brisk and compelling narratives. As a reasonable rule of thumb, you should plan on reading for this course **at least one hour every day** during the semester. This is not a light requirement, but it is one students can meet with a reasonable amount of dedication.

To assure reading accountability and engagement with the material, a short “four things” assignment pertaining to the week’s reading will be due in class **each Wednesday**. The assignment entails noting four items, observations, events, or themes that struck you from the assigned weekly reading and detailing their significance in no more than three sentences per item. You should connect one of your observations to the 2024 campaign or other recent events.

Assignments:

1. Weekly reading, consistent participation, weekly “four things” assignment, and one classroom presentation of the assigned reading. 35% **Any unexcused absence will lead to a one-third drop in your final course grade.**
2. Attendance at Danielle Allen *and* Doris Kearns Goodwin lectures at the Jepson Leadership Forum and Weinstein-Rosenthal Forum, September 12 and October 7, and submission of a “four things” assignment about the lectures due in class September 17 (Allen) and October 9 (Goodwin).
3. Viewing of presidential and vice-presidential debates (currently scheduled for September 10, October 1, and a date TBA) and submission of a personal response (1-2 pages) within 24 hours of completion of the debate. You should also read (online or in print) at least one news article and one opinion piece published in a periodical of record regarding the 2024 campaign every day in the course from August 26 to November 8. 5%
4. Thirty minutes of observation of a polling precinct in the City of Richmond on election day, November 5. You will be assigned in pairs to observe activities at a precinct across

the nine districts of the City of Richmond. Completion of a “two things” write-up about your observations to bring to class on November 6.

5. One five-page memorandum addressed either to the President-elect of the United States *or* to the leader of the opposition party, due Friday November 8, consisting of leadership and tactical advice for a successful presidency (as informed by the assigned reading). 20%.
6. Three hour in-person final exam, to include closed book section (true/false; multiple choice; and short answers) and two written essays, for which you may consult assigned course texts as well as one page (front and back) of prepared notes. One essay will focus on mayoral leadership and one essay will focus on executive political leadership more broadly. **Monday December 9, 9 am – noon.** 40%

General grading standards:

- A range grades are given for truly outstanding written work that not only meets the basic requirements of the given assignment but also demonstrates exceptional insight, clarity, and depth of thought. For instance, an A-range paper will not simply forward a coherent argument, but also anticipate and attempt to answer likely objections to the argument, and/or acknowledge points at which one’s argument might be vulnerable. Such papers will also be very well-organized and well-written, and gracefully presented.
- B range grades are given for good and very good written work which amply meets all the basic requirements of the given assignment and reflects substantial effort and engagement with the material. Such work is generally well-written and well-organized, shows good understanding of the course material, and avoids major substantive or logical errors. *B is a good grade for any 5 assignment in this course, and B+ is a very good grade.*
- C range grades are given for work which attempts to fulfill the requirements of the assignment but which falls short in some substantial way, with respect to organization, writing quality, understanding of the material, or argumentative logic.

General Course Policies

1. Arrive at 10:25 a.m.. every class so we can start promptly at 10:30 a.m.
2. Get enough sleep before you come, and eat before you come.
3. Coffee, water, juice or soda in class are okay, but food is not.
4. Go to the bathroom ***before*** class. All cell phones and laptops must be completely powered off and stored away **prior to entering the classroom.**
5. Bring your book to class every time.
6. In some class sessions, we may watch documentary excerpts related to the reading of up to 30 minutes. Students are expected to watch attentively and take notes on these occasions.
7. All students must attend professor’s office hours at least once prior to fall break.

How and Why to READ for this Class

Reading must be the fundamental default activity of all college students. When you are not doing anything else, you should be reading. This class will require that you do a lot of reading.

We live in a culture that has devalued deep reading and thinking. Why then read books, as opposed to just a series of short articles or excerpts? Because books are still the best technology we have for allowing a sophisticated train of thought—or body of knowledge—to be communicated from one human mind to another. A book allows the author to explore an event, person, or question in sustained depth, to present a sustained argument supported by evidence, to make connections between different events or phenomena, or to explore all sides of a disputed question thoroughly. Or a book may simply expand or stimulate our imaginations, our moral consciences, our sense of what is possible in human life. To read an interesting, important, or imagination-expanding book is one of life's great pleasures—but it is a pleasure it takes effort to cultivate. Think of reading a book as engaging your mind with someone else's mind in an extended, in-depth conversation. If your reading takes the form of a thoughtful, internal conversation with the author, when it comes time to write your papers—your actual chance to “talk back” to the author and his or her ideas—you won't be struggling to generate material from scratch; instead you will simply be transcribing and refining the conversation you've already had in your brain. Good writing is fundamentally a result of good thinking, and good thinking comes about via the practice and habit of being in conversation with good thinkers—such as the authors we will be reading this semester.

But how then to read thoughtfully? First, cut out the distractions. Turn off social media, the Internet, and anything else that might tempt you to turn your mind away from what you are reading. Find a quiet space where you can concentrate fully on the text. Second, set yourself an attainable goal for how long you will concentrate fully on reading the text. Whether it's thirty minutes, an hour, or two hours, set a goal, and stick to that goal, with the aim of increasing it over time. If you can learn how to sit in the library or somewhere for three consecutive hours, reading for 45-50 minutes at a time, then taking 10-15 minute breaks each hour, you will over the course of the week get a lot done—and more importantly, have a lot of fruitful conversations with great thinkers and writers. Third, take notes as you go—either in the text margins, or in a notebook. This is helpful in keeping track of the author's train of thought, and will help you remember arguments and key points when you go back to review or re-read. Fourth, when you are done reading a section, write down a few key points the author made, or alternatively some questions you have about the author's arguments. Fifth, as you are reading, think not just about the face value arguments of the text, but also about the author's intended audience and purpose. Why and for whom was this book written? Being able to answer that question often is very helpful in understanding the text as a whole. Sixth—and this is the most advanced skill, and one that will take time to master—think *critically* about what you are reading. Even the most brilliant texts, texts that have impeccable internal logic and that will make you smarter simply by reading them, have limitations of perspective and purpose. What does a text written about politics in the 1970s have to say of enduring significance *for us, today*? That's a question that ultimately we as students must think through for ourselves.

COURSE OF STUDY

WEEK ONE

August 26. Political Leadership and Why it Matters

Readings distributed via email and Blackboard. Note special Tuesday meeting

- Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” (1918)
- Jane Mansbridge, “On the Importance of Getting Things Done” (2011 James Madison Lecture)
- Thad Williamson, “A General Theory of Good Executive Leadership” (2024)
- Constitution of the United States of America (1787)

August 28. Presidencies of Richard M. Nixon and Gerald R. Ford

Chris Whipple, *The Gatekeepers: How the White House Chiefs of Staff Define Every Presidency*, Chapters 1 & 2

WEEK TWO. The Presidency of Jimmy E. Carter, 1977-1981

September 2. Origins

Kai Bird, *The Outlier: The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter*, Prologue, Chapters 1-2

September 4. Early Political Career and Election

Bird, *The Outlier*, Chapters 3-5

WEEK THREE. The Carter Presidency, continued

September 9. Year One

Bird, *The Outlier*, Chapters 6-8

Presidential debate.

September 11. Foreign Policy, I

Bird, *The Outlier*, Chapters 9-12

Danielle Allen lecture, September 12, 5 pm.

WEEK FOUR. The Carter Presidency, continued

September 16. Camp David (Israel-Egypt); Iran (I)

Bird, *The Outlier*, Chapters, 13-16

September 18. Mid-Term Pivot

Bird, *The Outlier*, Chapters 17-20

WEEK FIVE. The Carter Presidency, continued

September 23. Iran, II; Democratic Primary, 1980

Bird, *The Outlier*, Chapters 21-23

September 25. “October Surprise,” General Election, Transition of Power

Bird, *The Outlier*, Chapters 24-27, Epilogue

WEEK SIX. The Presidency, 1981-2009

In-class student presentations begin.

September 30. Presidencies of Ronald W. Reagan and George H.W. Bush

Whipple, *The Gatekeepers*, Chapters 4-6

October 1: Vice-Presidential Debate

October 2. Presidencies of William J. Clinton and George W. Bush

Whipple, *The Gatekeepers*, Chapters 7-8

WEEK SEVEN. The Presidency, 2009-2021

October 7. Presidencies of Barack H. Obama and Donald J. Trump

Whipple, *The Gatekeepers*, Chapters 9-10

October 9. Open Discussion Day

Initial discussion of presidential memoranda; short assigned readings related to January 6, 2021;
short assigned readings related to national elections

WEEK EIGHT. The Presidency of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2021-23

October 14. *Fall Break, no class*

October 16. January – June 2021

Franklin Foer, *The Last Politician: Inside Joe Biden's White House and the Struggle for America's Future*, Parts 1 and 2

WEEK NINE. The Biden Presidency, continued.

October 21. June 2021 – December 2021

Foer, *The Last Politician*, Parts 3 and 4

October 23. January-February 2022

Foer, *The Last Politician*, Part 5

WEEK TEN. The Biden Presidency, continued

October 28. February-April 2022

Foer, *The Last Politician*, Part 6

October 30. May-November 2022

Foer, *The Last Politician*, Part 7

WEEK ELEVEN. Election Preview and Review

November 4

Election Preview, readings TBA

November 5: Election Day, required poll observation in City of Richmond.

November 6

Election review; workshopping of memoranda to President-Elect

Memorandum to President-Elect or opposition party leader due Friday November 8, 6 p.m.

WEEK TWELVE. Local Politics and Mayoral Leadership, I (Philadelphia)

November 11. Transactional or (and/or?) Transformational? The Complex Nature of Urban Politics

William R. Riordan, *Plunkitt at Tammany Hall* (selections to be assigned)

Michael Nutter, *Mayor: The Best Job in Politics*, Part One

November 13. Governing Philadelphia

Nutter, *Mayor*, Parts Two and Three

WEEKS THIRTEEN and FOURTEEN. Local Politics and Mayoral Leadership, II (New York City)

November 18. Origins and Early Life

David N. Dinkins, *A Mayor's Life: Governing New York's Gorgeous Mosaic*, Chapters 1-5

Eric Klinenberg lecture, November 19, 7 p.m.

November 20. Election as Mayor and Early Years

Dinkins, *A Mayor's Life*, Chapters 6-9

November 25. Governing New York; Losing Re-election

Dinkins, *A Mayor's Life*, Chapters 10-14 and Postscript

Thanksgiving break, no class November 27

WEEK FIFTEEN. Local Politics and Mayoral Leadership, III (Chicago)

December 2. Gaining Election

Gregory Royal Pratt, *The City is Up for Grabs: How Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot Led and Lost a City in Crisis*, Chapters 1-11

December 4. Losing Traction

Pratt, *The City is Up for Grabs*, Chapters 12-21 and Epilogue

Jepson School of Leadership Studies and Course-Specific Policies

Awarding of Credit

To be successful in this course, a student should expect to devote 10-14 hours each week, including class time and time spent on course-related activities.

registrar.richmond.edu/services/policies/academic-credit.html

Disability Accommodations

Students with a Disability Accommodation Notice should contact their instructors as early in the semester as possible to discuss arrangements for completing course assignments and exams.

disability.richmond.edu/

Honor System

The Jepson School supports the provisions of the Honor System. The shortened version of the honor pledge is: “I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.” In this course, **no use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for any written assignment is permitted.**

<https://studentdevelopment.richmond.edu/student-handbook/honor/index.html>

Religious Observance

Students should notify their instructors within the first two weeks of classes if they will need accommodations for religious observance.

registrar.richmond.edu/planning/religiousobs.html

Addressing Microaggressions on Campus

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. Recent research has found that, when professors do not address microaggressions in class, microaggressions foster alienation of marginalized groups. Furthermore, both students and faculty that are exposed to microaggressions more often are more likely to have depressive symptoms and negative affect (a negative view of the world). A comfortable and productive environment where meaningful learning happens can be collectively created through actions, words, or environmental cues that promote the inclusion and success of marginalized members, recognizing their embodied identity, validating their realities, resisting sexism, ableism, and racism.

The University of Richmond is committed to building an inclusive community. To this end, the Student Center for Equity and Inclusion (SCEI) was created in 2021 and offers ongoing support and assistance for a diverse student body.¹ With this in mind, as a community member at the University of Richmond, I pledge to address microaggressions in the classroom by holding myself, other students, and faculty accountable for what is said and being receptive to criticism when perpetuating these slights, snubs, or insults.

¹ <https://inclusion.richmond.edu/>

ACADEMIC RESOURCES

If you experience difficulties in this course, do not hesitate to consult with me. There are also other resources that can support you in your efforts to meet course requirements.

Academic Skills Center (asc.richmond.edu): Assists students in assessing their academic strengths and weaknesses; honing their academic skills through teaching effective test preparation, critical reading and thinking, information conceptualization, concentration, and related techniques; working on specific subject areas (e.g., calculus, chemistry, accounting, etc.); and encouraging campus and community involvement. Tutors will be available virtually. The on-call peer-tutors available for these appointments are listed in the Box file: [On-Call Online Tutors](#) (<https://richmond.box.com/s/dpe37chr2zodr3o1amtj8omjk72v2ktb>). **Email** [Roger Mancastroppa](mailto:rmancast@richmond.edu) (rmancast@richmond.edu) **and** [Hope Walton](mailto:hw Walton@richmond.edu) (hw Walton@richmond.edu) **for appointments in academic and life skills to request a Zoom conference.**

Boatwright Library Research Librarians: (library.richmond.edu/help/ask/ or 289-8876): Research librarians help students with all steps of their research, from identifying or narrowing a topic, to locating, accessing, evaluating, and citing information resources. Librarians support students in their classes across the curriculum and provide library instruction, tutorials, research guides, and individual help. All research support will be provided online or by appointment and students can contact a librarian for help via email (library@richmond.edu), text (804-277-9ASK), chat, or Zoom (by appointment).

Career Services: (careerservices.richmond.edu or 289-8547): Can assist you in exploring your interests and abilities, choosing a major or course of study, connecting with internships and jobs, and investigating graduate and professional school options. We encourage you to schedule an appointment with a career advisor early in your time at UR.

Counseling and Psychological Services (caps.richmond.edu or 289-8119): Assists currently enrolled, full-time, degree-seeking students in improving their mental health and well-being, and in handling challenges that may impede their growth and development. Services include brief consultations, short-term counseling and psychotherapy, skills-building classes, crisis intervention, psychiatric consultation, and related services.

Disability Services (disability.richmond.edu) The Office of Disability Services works to ensure that qualified students with a disability (whether incoming or current) are provided with reasonable accommodations that enable students to participate fully in activities, programs, services and benefits provided to all students. Please let your professors know as soon as possible if you have an accommodation that requires academic coordination and planning.

Speech Center (speech.richmond.edu or 289-6409): Assists with preparation and practice in the pursuit of excellence in public expression. Recording, playback, coaching and critique sessions offered by teams of student consultants trained to assist in developing ideas, arranging key points for more effective organization, improving style and delivery, and handling multimedia aids for individual and group presentations. Remote practice sessions can be arranged; we look forward to meeting your public speaking needs.

Writing Center (writing.richmond.edu or 289-8263): Assists writers at all levels of experience, across all majors. Students can schedule appointments with trained writing consultants who offer friendly critiques of written work.