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 mid-20th century United States, with a particular focus on the political career of Lyndon B. Johnson in his time as a U.S. Senator (1949-1961). Specific additional questions to be explored include (but are not limited to):

• Understanding the role and workings of the Senate in U.S. history
• Understanding the relationship between the Senate and racial domination in the U.S.
• Understanding Johnson’s role in changing how the Senate operated and his navigation of competing regional blocs
• Understanding the role of money in politics
• Understanding the role of individual political personalities in driving outcomes in particular institutional contexts

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.

Before diving into Robert Caro’s study of Johnson, Master of the Senate, we will explore different theoretical conceptions of political leadership. The latter part of the course will consider the presidency and domestic record of Lyndon Johnson.

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. The primary text in the class, Robert Caro’s book, is long and at time dense with information. But it is also exceptionally well-written and engaging. The pace of the course requires that you read approximately two chapters of the book every three days. 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 600-800 word paper pertaining to the week’s reading will be due each Friday (exception: Thanksgiving week). Each student will also be responsible for at least two in-class presentations and preparation of brief reading notes throughout the semester.

This class will not have a term paper, but will have a final written exam.

**Assignments:**

1. Weekly reading and consistent participation. 15%.
2. Weekly papers of 600-800 words. Graded 1-10 scale. Due Friday 5 pm each week. All 14 papers must be submitted, top 12 counted. 50%.
3. Two (or more) in-class presentations/preparation of reading notes plus two political event observations. 10%
4. Final written exam. 25%.

**Additional Class Events:**

1. On Thursday September 1 at 4:30 p.m. I will be giving a lecture on Richmond politics to ChamberRVA’s Politics 101 class. This class will attend; attendance required unless you have a conflict with another course meeting.
2. There will be several Mayoral forums in the City in the months of September and October. Students will be required to attend at least one. A complete list of upcoming forums will be forthcoming. You must write a 600-800 word observation paper about this event.
3. Students are required to watch the televised presidential and vice-presidential debates. These are scheduled for the evenings. You must write a 600-800 word observation about any one of these debates. These debates are scheduled for September 26, October 4 (vice-presidential), October 9 and October 19.
4. We are seeking to complete arrangements for a field trip to visit the U.S. Senate.

**General Course Policies**

1. Arrive prior to 9:00 a.m. every class so we can start at 9:00 a.m.
2. Get enough sleep before you come, and eat breakfast.
3. Coffee in class is okay, but food is not.
4. Go to the bathroom before class. Do not interrupt class by doing so.
5. No electronic devices in use in class. All cell phones must be completely powered off and stored away.
6. Bring your book to class every time.
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 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 mid-20th century 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 22
- Course overview
- Edmund Burke, “Speech to the Electors of Bristol”
- Plunkitt of Tammany Hall, excerpt on “Honest Graft”
August 24
- Thomas Hobbes, De Cive, Chapters V and VI (pp. 69-90, Cambridge edition)
- Plato, Statesman, excerpt (pp. 63-85, Cambridge edition)

WEEK TWO
August 29
- Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”
August 31
- Harry McPherson, A Political Education, pp. 1-99

WEEK THREE
September 5
- No class (Labor day)
September 7
- Robert Caro, Master of the Senate, Intro and Chapters 1-3

WEEK FOUR
September 12
- Caro, Master of the Senate, Chapters 4-6
September 14
- Caro, Master of the Senate, Chapters 7-8

WEEK FIVE
September 19
• *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 9-11

**September 21**

• *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 12-14

**WEEK SIX**

**September 26**

• *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 15-17

**September 28**

• *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 18-19

**WEEK SEVEN**

**October 3**

• *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 20-22

**October 5**

• *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 23-24

**WEEK EIGHT**

**October 10**

• No class, fall break

**October 12**

• *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 25-27

**WEEK NINE**

**October 17**

• *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 28-29

**October 19**

• *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 30-31

**WEEK TEN**

**October 24**

• *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 32-34

**October 26**

• *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 35-36
WEEK ELEVEN
October 31
  •  *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 37-38

November 2
  •  *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 39-40

WEEK TWELVE
November 7
  •  *Master of the Senate*, Chapters 42-43

NOVEMBER 8: 2016 GENERAL ELECTION

November 9
  •  Analysis and discussion in class of presidential election and City of Richmond local election

WEEK 13
November 14
  •  McPherson, *A Political Education*, Chapters 6-7

November 16
  •  McPherson, *A Political Education*, Chapters 9-10

WEEK 14
November 21

November 23
  •  No class—Thanksgiving break

WEEK 15
November 28
  •  Woods, *Prisoners of Hope*, Chapters 7-8

November 30

FINAL EXAM:  Tuesday December 6, 9 a.m.
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.”
studentdevelopment.richmond.edu/student-handbook/honor/the-honor-code.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

*updated 8/10/2016