

**The Fund for American Studies
Politics & Press Seminar
George Mason University – Van Metre Hall 312
Syllabus – Econ 496.02
Spring 2023
Professor: Richard Benedetto
Email: benedett@american.edu**

Course Overview and Objectives:

The goal of this class is to help students integrate their internships, lectures, panel discussions and site briefings with the general theory and practice of political journalism in the early 21st Century. Emphasis will be on how the theories and practices are applied today in daily gathering, preparing, and presenting the news in various traditional and social media.

This course will be conducted at the outset of the third year of the Biden administration, and a split Congress where legislation is likely to be contentious, and at times messy.

Over the time of our course, we will study and analyze what the Biden administration is doing to raise the president's job approval, while having to deal with a House of Representatives controlled by the Republicans, who want a measure of revenge for what they see as bad treatment by Biden and the Democrats over the past two years.

We also will study and analyze Biden's management of the continuing Russia-Ukraine war, and how that is likely to play out politically for him and the Democratic Party. In addition, we will touch upon news coverage of other foreign policy events as they unfold, particularly in relation to Russia, China, Europe and Africa.

And through it all, we will examine and critique the performance of the news media in covering the day-to-day operations of government and politics, for better or worse.

In addition, we will analyze and critique not only the government's management of the continuing coronavirus pandemic, but also the role the news media have played in informing the public as events and crises unfold. To be sure, the performance of both the government and the media, so far, leaves much to criticize.

Among the key questions we will examine:

- **What is the mood of America as the Biden Administration begins its third year?**
- **How is President Biden performing his duties over a broad scope of issues and problems - foreign and domestic?**
- **How is Biden's approach to governance different from that of former president Donald Trump? Better or worse?**
- **What new programs and policies is Biden proposing and launching?**
- **What's new and different in foreign policy?**
- **How is the split Congress performing, so far?**
- **Has our foreign policy changed under Biden?**
- **What new programs and policies are high on the House and Senate agendas?**
- **Are the news media covering the Biden Administration fairly and objectively,**
- **or is there slant or bias in the coverage?**
- **Is news coverage similar or different from coverage of President Trump?**
- **What information does the public need to know as the year unfolds?**
- **Are the news media providing it?**
- **What role are social media playing – positive or negative?**
- **What are the public opinion polls showing?**

Much will be happening while our class is meeting, so paying close attention to breaking news media coverage of the White House and Congress on a daily basis is essential to stay current. Knowing what is happening from week to week is a must.

We also will discuss the changing environment of news as it relates to new media such as the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media, plus the 24-hour news cycle. What all these changes mean for the future direction of news reporting on politics and government will be a continuing theme.

Weekly sessions will focus on the biggest news issues of the week and cover topics such as news media accuracy, objectivity, bias, use of unnamed sources as they report on government institutions, primarily the presidency and Congress. We also will discuss the use of polling in political reporting.

Students are encouraged to discuss their internships and share their experiences. By class end, each student will take away a well-defined picture of how political journalism – 2023 style - is practiced in Washington, D.C., for better and for worse, and make suggestions for improvement.

Note: This is an open classroom. All political points of view are welcome for thoughtful and respectful discussion.

Freedom of Speech is practiced here.

About Your Professor

Richard Benedetto is veteran political reporter with more than 40 years of experience covering local, state, and national government and politics. He retired from his post as White House correspondent for USA Today and political columnist for Gannett News Service in 2006. He began teaching at American University in the Fall 2006 semester. Since then, he has taught courses in the School of Communication and the School of Public Affairs. He also teaches in The Fund for American Studies Capital Semester and Summer IPJ programs at George Mason University. He began teaching for The Fund in 2005.

University Press of America published Benedetto's memoir of his long reporting career, *Politicians Are People, Too*, in April 2006. He also published a collection of columns, "Around And About" in 2019.

A native of Utica, N.Y., Benedetto began his journalism career with the Buffalo, (N.Y.) Evening News, and held government/politics reporting positions with the Utica (N.Y.) Daily Press and Observer-Dispatch. He also worked in the Albany, N.Y. bureau of Gannett News Service covering state government, politics, and elections.

Benedetto is a founding member of USA Today joining the newspaper in 1982, prior to its debut. He wrote the newspaper's first Page One cover story.

In Washington, he covered the administrations of Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. He also covered every congressional and presidential election campaign since 1984. He is now a contributor to Politico, RealClearPolitics, USA Today, The Hill, The Wall Street Journal and C-Span.

Benedetto holds B.A., M.A. and doctoral degrees from Syracuse University. Among his numerous journalism awards, he most values his 1998 Media Award presented by the National Italian American Foundation for projecting a positive image of Italian Americans.

Required Texts:

Mass Media and American Politics, 11th Edition, Johanna Dunaway & Doris A. Graber CQ Press, 2023.

Politicians Are People, Too, Richard Benedetto, University Press of America, 2006

Selected readings will be distributed or posted on Blackboard, and additional reading assignments will be made. Other readings in the field will be suggested, but not required. Students are expected to arrive in class on time with reading assignments completed and ready to discuss

Suggested Reading:

Read daily political and media coverage in newspapers such as The Washington Post, New York Times and USA TODAY, in print or online, preferably in print.

Also read specialized newspapers, magazines and websites that cover media and politics such *as Columbia Journalism Review, Politico, The Hill, Campaigns and Elections, National Journal, Congressional Quarterly, Atlantic, New Republic, Daily Beast, National Review.* www.realclearpolitics.com and www.gallup.com are good places to find the latest polling information.

The White House, the Senate and The House, along with major political parties also have Websites that provide a lot of information and perspective. The key here is resourcefulness. There is plenty of information out there if you take the time to seek it out and read it. I also might call to your attention from timely articles that pertain to the course which I think you should read.

Weekly News Article Discussion

For every class, one student will be responsible for bringing to class one political or media-related news article printed in a newspaper, journal or posted on the Web. That student will be responsible for leading a 10-15-minute class discussion about the article he or she selected. Since there are more students than classes, I will conduct a lottery and select students at random to be presenters. Presentations will not be graded.

Articles for discussion must come from a newspaper, news network, magazine, journal, or news Website. Avoid blogs unless they are relevant to our class discussion. When it is your turn to select the article, you must email its link to me **NO LATER THAN 24 HOURS** before the class meets so that I can forward the article to the rest of the class for reading in advance. That means I need it by Thursday noon. Quizzes might be given from time to time to determine if you are doing the reading.

Assignments:

In addition to the assigned readings and article discussions, I will give short writing assignments or quizzes on the reading. There also will be a final paper.

Final Paper:

A final research paper will be due in Week 6. Topics will be assigned on first day of class.

Grading:

Grades will be determined by student attendance and participation in class discussions, written assignments, evaluation of the final paper and evaluation by your internship supervisor.

Grading Standards

All grades are based upon the student's effort and results not only in written assignments, quizzes, and projects, but also on class attendance, participation, and discussion. One fifth of the grade (20 percent) will be based upon your internship.

- An 'A' student is one who demonstrates superior work in all aspects of the class and assignments. All work is submitted on time, Class attendance is near perfect and on time. Grades on homework, quizzes, papers, and projects are in the superior category and truly stand out. The A student also is a clear leader and creative thinker in class discussions. An 'A' is earned, not given
- A 'B' student falls slightly short of the 'A' standard in one or more aspects of the above criteria, but still demonstrates above-average interest, effort, creativity, and skill in meeting the highest standard.
- A 'C' student is clearly short of the 'A' and 'B' standards, more than likely due to lack of effort to come to class regularly or on time, written assignments and quizzes that don't match up with those of most of the class and a shortage in class participation. I expect that few students, if any, will fall into this category.
- A 'D' or 'F' grade should be self-explanatory and need no further discussion here. I do not expect to give anyone these grades.

Grading breakdown

- Internship: 20 percent
- Class quizzes, attendance, written assignments, and participation - 50 percent
- Final Paper – 30 percent
- Total - 100 percent

Grading scale

A 95-100

A- 90-94

B+ 86-89

B 83-85

B- 80-82

C+ 75-79

C 72-74

C- 70-71

D 68-69

F 67 or below

George Mason University's Grading Table:

Letter Grade	Grade Points	Undergraduate Courses
A+	4.00	Satisfactory / Passing
A	4.00	Satisfactory / Passing
A-	3.67	Satisfactory / Passing
B+	3.33	Satisfactory / Passing
B	3.00	Satisfactory / Passing
B-	2.67	Satisfactory / Passing
C+	2.33	Satisfactory / Passing
C	2.00	Satisfactory / Passing
C-	1.67	Satisfactory* / Passing
D	1.00	Unsatisfactory / Passing
F	0.00	Unsatisfactory / Failing

Attendance:

Since this is a class that meets only once a week, students are required to attend all classes – in-person and online - unless they have an excused absence. Having to run personal errands or missing class because you are tired are not excused absences. If your internship requires you to work during class time, you must a note from your supervisor saying so.

If you are ill, let me know in advance, if possible.

Honesty and Integrity

I do not have to give you a lecture on honesty and integrity. By now, you should all know the acceptable standards. Violations such as plagiarism or cheating will not be tolerated.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week 1- Friday March 10

Introduction:

- **A look at the Washington Political Landscape in MARCH 2022**
- **Syllabus Review**
- **Class member introductions**

Advance readings: Chapter 1 and 2 in Graber text
Chapter 1 - *Politicians Are People, Too.*

Introductory Discussion:

- **What is the big news of 2022, so far?**
- **What is right and what is wrong with how we report**
 - **the news of government and politics?**
- **How is the news business changing, and why?**
- **What are the hottest problems confronting the news media as the Biden Administration enters its second year.**
- **What are the chances of Democrats retaining control of Congress in the**
- **Elections?**
- **What's the status of media reporting on coronavirus as pandemic approaches its second anniversary?**
- **How is the Russia-Ukraine war affecting U.S. politics?**

- A brief tour of the history of journalism in the American tradition and how it is changing.
- Assignment for March 24 – To be Assigned

Friday March 17 – No Class Spring Break

Week 2 – Friday March 24

How do the News Media Cover the Presidency?

- Final Paper Assignment
- Student-led Article Discussion -
- What is the big news of the week?
- What do the polls show?
- What is the tone of the news coverage as the Biden Administration gets into its third year, and how does it compare to the first and second years?
- What is the big Washington news story of the week?
- Assignment for March 31 - To be assigned

Week 3 – Friday March 31

How Do the News Media Cover Congress?

Student-led Article Discussion:

- How Do the News Media cover Congress? Good or Bad?

- How are the media covering the split Congress, fairly or with a slant?
- What kind of a start did the Republican House have, so far?
- What are the big issues being considered by Congress?
- How does President Biden relate to and work with Congress?

Assignment for Friday April 7 – To be assigned

Week 5 – Friday April 7

How Polling is used by Media in Covering Government and Politics

Student-led Article Discussion

Political Polls are everywhere. Some are good, and some are bad.

- How can we tell the difference?
- Which polls can we trust?
- How can polls be manipulated?
- How interpretation of polls can be misleading.
- What are polls showing for President Biden and Congress?
- How accurate were the 2022 congressional election polls?

Assignment for April 14 - To be assigned

Week 5 – Friday April 14

Student-led Article Discussion

- How New and Social Media have changed our political discourse and our perceptions of government, politics, and politicians - for better and for worse.
- Does political reporting in the Digital Age, with its emphasis on speed and snappy opinions, often blur or distort the truth?

- How have social media affected us as political observers, analysts and participants?
- Are people who depend on or get most of their news from social media better informed than those who use traditional news sources?

Assignment for Friday April 21– To be assigned

Week 6 – Friday April 21

Media Coverage of Foreign Affairs

Student-led article discussion

- What kind of a job do American news media do in covering foreign affairs?
- Are Americans well informed when it comes to foreign affairs?
- What factors must be taken into consideration in examining these questions?
- How good job are American media doing in covering the war in Afghanistan?

Assignment for Wednesday April 26 – Complete Final Papers

Week 7 – Wednesday April 26

Summing Up – What do we know now about media coverage of Washington that we didn't know coming into this class?

Final Papers Due

Student-led Article Discussion

- Final Papers Due
- Summing Up
- Student Summaries of Final Papers

- **An Update and Critical Review of How the News Media are doing covering government and politics in the nation's capital?**
- **Where does Congress stand at this juncture?**
- **Where Does President Biden stand?**
- **Where do the news media stand?**
- **Recommendations for improvement?**