

**The Fund for American Studies  
Politics & Press Internships Seminar  
George Mason University  
Syllabus – Econ 496.01  
Spring 2021  
Professor: Richard Benedetto  
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**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 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Emphasis will be on how the theories and practices are applied today in daily gathering, preparing and presenting the news in various media.

This course will be conducted at the outset of a new Biden presidential administration and the debut of a Congress controlled by the Democrats. Over the time of our course, we will study and analyze how the new administration and Congress are doing in their debuts.

We also will examine and critique the performance of the news media in covering the day-to-day operations of government and politics, for better and for worse.

**Among the questions we will examine:**

- What is the mood of America as the new administration debuts?
- How is President Biden doing in the early days of his administration?
- How is his approach to governance different from that of his predecessor?
- What new programs and policies is he proposing and launching?
- How will our foreign policy change?
- How is Congress different now that the Democrats control both houses?
- What new programs and policies are high on the House and Senate agendas?
- How are the news media covering Washington in the early days of the new administration?
- Are the news media covering the administration fairly and objectively, or is there slant or bias in the coverage?
- Is coverage similar or different from coverage of President Trump?
- What information does the public need to know as the new administration unfolds, and are the news media providing it?
- What role are social media playing in this new political environment – positive or negative?
- What are the early polls showing?

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

In addition, we will examine some of the current legal and ethical issues facing journalists and the people they report on and deal with.

We also will study 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 is practiced in Washington, D.C., for better and for worse, and make some 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, 10<sup>th</sup> Edition, Doris A, Graber & Johanna Dunaway, Sage Press**

**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](http://www.realclearpolitics.com) and [www.gallup.com](http://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 will call to your attention from time to time 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- Wednesday, January 27 + Friday January 29**

Introduction:

- A new Biden Administration – How did its first week go?
- A look at the Washington Political Landscape in January 2021
- Syllabus Review
- Class member introductions

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

#### Introductory Discussion:

- What is news in 2021?
- 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 a new president takes office?
- A brief tour of the history of journalism in the American tradition and how it is changing
- Assignment for Feb. 5 – To be Assigned

#### **Week 2 – Friday February 5**

How do the News Media Cover the Presidency?

- Final Paper Assignment
- Student 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 up and running?
- What is the big Washington news story of the week?
- Assignment for February 12 - To be assigned

### **Week 3 – February 12 (Lincoln’s Birthday)**

How Do the News Media Cover Congress?

Student Article Discussion:

- How for the news media cover Congress?
- How is the new Democratic-controlled Congress getting started?
- What will it mean with both Houses of Congress controlled by the Democrats?
- Are there early signs of what big issues the congressional leaders will push?

Assignment for Feb. 19 – To be assigned

### **Week 4 – February 19**

How Polling is used by Media in Covering Government and Politics

Student 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.
- How accurate were 2020 presidential election polls?

Assignment for February 26 - To be assigned

## **Week 5 – Friday February 26**

### News 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 and analysts?

Are people who depend get most of their news from social media better informed than those who use traditional news sources?

Assignment for Friday March 5 – Final Papers Due

## **Week 6 – Friday March 5**

- Final Papers Due
- Student Article Discussion
- Summing Up
- Student Summaries of Final Papers
- An Update and Critical Review of How the News Media have covered
- the first seven weeks of Congress and the Biden Administration.
- Recommendations for Improvement