

The Fund for American Studies  
Politics & Press Seminar  
George Mason University  
Syllabus – Econ 496.02  
Spring 2019  
Professor: Richard Benedetto  
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## **Course 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 everyday gathering, preparing and presenting the news in various media.

**This course will be conducted in the early months of the Trump Administration's third year. The first 26 months have been tumultuous, to say the least. Therefore, study and analysis of the rocky relationship between the Trump White House and Congress, Trump and the Democrats, Trump and the special prosecutor and the bitter feud between Trump and the news media will be major focuses of class discussions and assignments.**

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, 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 semester's 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.

**One 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.

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 Fox News.

Benedetto holds B.A., M.A. and doctoral degrees from Syracuse University.

Among his numerous journalism awards, Benedetto most values his 1998 Media Award presented by the National Italian American Foundation for projecting a positive image of Italian Americans.

## Required Texts

**We the People (Eleventh Essentials Edition) 11th Edition – Benjamin Ginsberg, et al.  
Paperback, W.W. Norton Company**

**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 and The Weekly Standard*

[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 in 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 15-20-minute class discussion about the article he or she selected. Since there are more students than classes, I will conduct a lottery and select seven 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. There will be a midterm assignment in Week 4 based on our class discussions and readings up to that point, mostly essay questions, and a final paper.

## **Final Paper:**

A final research paper will be due in Week 7. **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 successful completion of your internship.

## **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 - 40 percent
- Midterm Exam – 15 percent
- Final Paper – 25 percent
- Total - 100 percent

## Grading standards

**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 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 bring in 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 8**

**Introduction: What is News in the Early 21<sup>ST</sup> Century?**

**Final Paper Assignment**

**Syllabus Review**

**Advance readings:**

**Chapters 1-2 – *Politicians Are People, Too.***

**Chapters 1 and 3 in “We the People”**

**Class member introductions.**

**What is news? 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**

**in the era of Trump? A brief tour of the history of journalism in the American tradition and how it is changing, as we speak.**

## **March 15 – No Class – Spring Break**

## **Week 2 – March 22**

### **Covering the Presidency and the Congress**

#### **Assigned readings:**

**Chapters 3, 4 and 5 – *Politicians Are People, Too*  
Chapters 2, 9 and 10 in *“We the People.”***

#### **Student Article Discussion -**

**What is the big news of the week?**

**How do the media cover the presidency and Congress and how is it changing?**

**What is the tone of coverage of Congress by the media?**

**Why do the media cover the presidency more heavily than Congress?**

**Current issues and debates on Capitol Hill?**

## **Week 3 – March 29**

### **How the Trump Administration and the Media Interact**

#### **Student Article Discussion:**

**Assigned readings: Chapter 6 and 8 in *“We the People.”***

**What is the role of media in coverage of government? Watchdogs or Opposition Party?**

**How does the White House manage or manipulate the media? Are media “enemy of the People?”**

**Trump’s use of Twitter, good or bad?**

**How fair are the media on this administration? How does coverage compare to Obama, Bush, Clinton? What is “fake news?” Suggestions for improvement?**

## **Week 4 – April 5**

### **How Polling is used by Media in Covering Government and Politics**

### **Midterm Exam Assigned – take-home - due next class meeting – April 12**

#### **Student Article Discussion**

**Assigned readings: Chapter 5 “Public Opinion” in *“We the People”***

**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 went wrong with polls in 2016 presidential election? How accurate were the 2017 midterm election polls?**

## **Week 5 – April 12**

### **Midterm Exam Due in Class**

**How New and Social Media have changed our political discourse and our perceptions of government, politics and politicians - For better and for worse?**

**We will discuss the problems and perils of reporting in the Digital Age with its emphasis on speed and opinion, often blurring what is really happening. Moreover, speed is sometimes often sacrificing accuracy and in-depth analysis. How have social media affected us as political observers and partisans.? Are we better informed than those who get their news from traditional sources?**

#### **Student Article Discussion**

**Assigned Readings: Reread Chapter 6 in “We the People. Other readings to be assigned.**

## **Week 6 – April 19**

**The Status of Investigations relating to Trump’s alleged collusion with the Russian government during the 2016 election.**

**We will update ourselves on the various investigations, how they are covered by the news media and makes some assessments on where they all might end.**

#### **Student Article Discussion**

**Assigned Readings: Readings to be assigned.**

## **Week 7 – April 26**

**Final Papers Due (Returned at closing ceremony)**

**A look at the status of the 2020 presidential race already under way**

**We will look at the candidates out there so far, where they stand in the polls, and how they might match up in an election with President Trump.**

**What are the key issues emerging, in addition to the record of Trump himself. What is Trump’s re-election strategy?**

#### **Student Article Discussion**

**Assigned Readings: To be assigned**

