

**COMM 460 Presidential Communication**  
Spring 2021

Dr. Mercieca  
Office: Zoom  
Office Hours: T/TH 11:00-12:00 and by appointment.  
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This class is conducted remotely via zoom at the appointed class time.

**Course Description:**

There has been a distinct disruption in presidential communication over the past four years. This course will put those changes into their institutional and historical context. We will examine how American presidents have responded to changes in communication technologies in a predictable arc from the rhetorical presidency to the post-rhetorical presidency to the outrage presidency. We will examine both traditional topics related to communication and the American presidency and recent concerns about communication and the American presidency. We will also examine how President Donald Trump has harnessed the logics of outrage, engagement, and attention to dominate the American public sphere.

**Student Learning Outcomes:**

By the end of the semester students will have the critical and analytic tools necessary to participate in the political process and will have experience in working as political campaign consultants and speech-writers.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- **Critical Thinking Skills** - to include creative thinking, innovation, inquiry, and analysis, evaluation and synthesis of information
- **Communication Skills** - to include effective development, interpretation and expression of ideas through written, oral and visual communication
- **Social Responsibility:** to include intercultural competence, knowledge of civic responsibility, and the ability to engage effectively in regional, national, and global communities

**Required Readings:**

Jennifer Mercieca, *Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump* (Texas A&M University Press, 2020). (available for purchase in hardbound, ebook, or audiobook or available for free through the TAMU Library)

All other course materials are available as pdf files on **eCampus**. You will need the Adobe Acrobat Reader, which is available through any on-campus computer. We will discuss each reading in class on the day that it appears on the calendar.

### **Grading:**

Your work in this class will be graded carefully and strictly. I assume that you are capable of writing mature, upper division-level essays. Plagiarism (including cutting and pasting from the internet without citing the original source) will not be tolerated. Because this is a writing intensive course, students cannot pass this course without passing the writing assignments. Your work will be graded according to the following scale:

Every paper you turn in will be graded according to the quality of your Prose, Intellectual Content, and Argument.

- 1) Prose: writing that shows both advanced academic writing and no grammatical errors.
- 2) Intellectual Content: insightful analysis, not mere summary.
- 3) Argument: you have made a clear argument and supported it with solid evidence.

**A = Exceptionally Strong Work** that demonstrates excellence in all three of the above categories.

**B = solid, strong work** that misses one category while still achieving excellence in two categories.

**C = work that addresses the criteria of the assignment** while exhibiting serious flaws in one or more categories.

**D = work that is poorly written and is structurally flawed.** Such work requires, at the very least, immediate office consultation with me.

### **Grading Scale** (in points):

A = 89.51-100

B = 79.51-89.50

C = 69.51- 79.50

D = 59.51-69.50

F = 59.50 and below

### **Assignments:**

**Weekly Essay Assignment:** each week there will be a writing prompt based upon that week's readings. You are required to write a two-page response to the question I've asked, drawing from the readings to explain your answer (**quote** from the readings as evidence to explain your position). Your weekly essay will be due (turn it in on ecampus) at the beginning of class each week as indicated on your weekly calendar. Your paper should be double spaced, free from proofreading errors, well-focused on the question I've asked, and incorporate quotations from **all** of that week's assigned readings. You will find each week's writing prompt on the class calendar below. Each week's essay is worth 5 points (13 x 5 = 65 points total)

**Final Paper Assignment:** select one of the weekly writing prompts and (incorporating my feedback from your first paper) expand upon your answer to include reflections from the

readings from the rest of the semester. Your final paper will be due **May 4** (turn it in on ecampus). Your paper should be double spaced, free from proofreading errors, well-focused on the question I've asked, and incorporate quotations from at least six assigned readings. Your final paper should be 6-8 pages in length. Your final paper is worth 35 points.

Weekly Essays	65
Final Essay	35

Total Possible Points = 100

### Course Policies

#### University Writing Center:

The mission of the University Writing Center (UWC) is to help you develop and refine the communication skills vital to success in college and beyond. Currently, you can choose to work with a trained UWC peer consultant via web conference or email. You can schedule an appointment to discuss any kind of writing or speaking project, including research papers, lab reports, application essays, or creative writing. Our consultants can work with you at any stage of your process, whether you're deciding on a topic or reviewing your final draft. You can also get help with public speaking, presentations, and group projects. To schedule an appointment or to view our handouts, videos, or interactive learning modules, visit [writingcenter.tamu.edu](http://writingcenter.tamu.edu). Questions? Call 979-458-1455 or email [uwc@tamu.edu](mailto:uwc@tamu.edu).

#### Attendance Policy

The university views class attendance and participation as an individual student responsibility. Students are expected to attend class and to complete all assignments. Please refer to [Student Rule 7](#) in its entirety for information about excused absences, including definitions, and related documentation and timelines.

#### Makeup Work Policy

Students will be excused from attending class on the day of a graded activity or when attendance contributes to a student's grade, for the reasons stated in Student Rule 7, or other reason deemed appropriate by the instructor.

Please refer to [Student Rule 7](#) in its entirety for information about makeup work, including definitions, and related documentation and timelines.

Absences related to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 may necessitate a period of more than 30 days for make-up work, and the timeframe for make-up work should be agreed upon by the student and instructor" ([Student Rule 7, Section 7.4.1](#)).

"The instructor is under no obligation to provide an opportunity for the student to make up work missed because of an unexcused absence" ([Student Rule 7, Section 7.4.2](#)).

Students who request an excused absence are expected to uphold the Aggie Honor Code and Student Conduct Code. (See [Student Rule 24](#).)

### **Academic Integrity Statement and Policy**

“An Aggie does not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate those who do.”

“Texas A&M University students are responsible for authenticating all work submitted to an instructor. If asked, students must be able to produce proof that the item submitted is indeed the work of that student. Students must keep appropriate records at all times. The inability to authenticate one’s work, should the instructor request it, may be sufficient grounds to initiate an academic misconduct case” ([Section 20.1.2.3, Student Rule 20](#)).

You can learn more about the Aggie Honor System Office Rules and Procedures, academic integrity, and your rights and responsibilities at [aggiehonor.tamu.edu](http://aggiehonor.tamu.edu).

### **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Policy**

Texas A&M University is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. If you experience barriers to your education due to a disability or think you may have a disability, please contact Disability Resources in the Student Services Building or at (979) 845-1637 or visit [disability.tamu.edu](http://disability.tamu.edu). Disabilities may include, but are not limited to attentional, learning, mental health, sensory, physical, or chronic health conditions. All students are encouraged to discuss their disability related needs with Disability Resources and their instructors as soon as possible.

### **Title IX and Statement on Limits to Confidentiality**

Texas A&M University is committed to fostering a learning environment that is safe and productive for all. University policies and federal and state laws prohibit gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment, including sexual assault, sexual exploitation, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking.

With the exception of some medical and mental health providers, all university employees (including full and part-time faculty, staff, paid graduate assistants, student workers, etc.) are Mandatory Reporters and must report to the Title IX Office if the employee experiences, observes, or becomes aware of an incident that meets the following conditions (see [University Rule 08.01.01.M1](#)):

- The incident is reasonably believed to be discrimination or harassment.
- The incident is alleged to have been committed by or against a person who, at the time of the incident, was (1) a student enrolled at the University or (2) an employee of the University.

Mandatory Reporters must file a report regardless of how the information comes to their attention – including but not limited to face-to-face conversations, a written class assignment or paper, class discussion, email, text, or social media post. Although Mandatory Reporters must file a report, in most instances, you will be able to control how the report is handled, including whether or not to pursue a formal investigation. The University’s goal is to make sure you are aware of the range of options available to you and to ensure access to the resources you need.

Students wishing to discuss concerns in a confidential setting are encouraged to make an appointment with [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) (CAPS).

Students can learn more about filing a report, accessing supportive resources, and navigating the Title IX investigation and resolution process on the University's [Title IX webpage](#).

### **Statement on Mental Health and Wellness**

Texas A&M University recognizes that mental health and wellness are critical factors that influence a student's academic success and overall wellbeing. Students are encouraged to engage in proper self-care by utilizing the resources and services available from Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS). Students who need someone to talk to can call the TAMU Helpline (979-845-2700) from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. weekdays and 24 hours on weekends. 24-hour emergency help is also available through the National Suicide Prevention Hotline (800-273-8255) or at [suicidepreventionlifeline.org](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org).

### **Campus Safety Measures**

To promote public safety and protect students, faculty, and staff during the coronavirus pandemic, Texas A&M University has adopted policies and practices for the Spring 2021 academic term to limit virus transmission. Students must observe the following practices while participating in face-to-face courses and course-related activities (office hours, help sessions, transitioning to and between classes, study spaces, academic services, etc.):

- Self-monitoring – Students should follow CDC recommendations for self-monitoring. Students who have a fever or exhibit symptoms of COVID-19 should participate in class remotely if that option is available, and should not participate in face-to-face instruction.
- Face Coverings – [Face coverings](#) (cloth face covering, surgical mask, etc.) must be properly worn in all non-private spaces including classrooms, teaching laboratories, common spaces such as lobbies and hallways, public study spaces, libraries, academic resource and support offices, and outdoor spaces where 6 feet of physical distancing is difficult to reliably maintain. Description of face coverings and additional guidance are provided in the [Face Covering policy](#) and [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQ\)](#) available on the [Provost website](#).
- Physical Distancing – Physical distancing must be maintained between students, instructors, and others in course and course-related activities.
- Classroom Ingress/Egress – Students must follow marked pathways for entering and exiting classrooms and other teaching spaces. Leave classrooms promptly after course activities have concluded. Do not congregate in hallways and maintain 6-foot physical distancing when waiting to enter classrooms and other instructional spaces.
- To attend a face-to-face class, students must properly wear an approved face covering. If a student refuses to wear a face covering, the instructor should ask the student to leave and join the class remotely. If the student does not leave the class, the faculty member should report that student to the [Student Conduct office](#) for sanctions. Additionally, the faculty member may choose to teach that day's class remotely for all students, or dismiss the class in the case of a traditional face to face lecture.

### **Personal Illness and Quarantine**

Students required to quarantine or self-isolate should still participate in courses and course-related activities remotely and **must not attend face-to-face course activities**. Students under quarantine or self-isolation are expected to participate in courses and complete graded work

unless they have symptoms that are too severe to participate in course activities. Instructors teaching courses delivered only face-to-face should work closely with students who are in quarantine or self-isolation to ensure the student keeps up with the work.

Students experiencing personal injury or illness that is too severe for the student to attend class qualify for an excused absence (see [Student Rule 7, Section 7.2.2](#)). To receive an excused absence, students must comply with the documentation and notification guidelines outlined in Student Rule 7. While Student Rule 7, Section 7.3.2.1, indicates a medical confirmation note from the student's medical provider is preferred, please be understanding as not all illnesses may require a visit to a physician, especially during this time.

## Class Calendar

DATE	READ/WATCH	DUE	WRITING PROMPT
January 19	Course introduction & syllabus.	Read the syllabus.	NONE
January 21	Course overview	Mercieca, "The Emergence of the Outrage Presidency," 1-6.	NONE
January 26	How did the Founders create the presidency?	Carol Birkin, "Introduction," "The Perils of Power," 1-10, 68-95.	NONE
January 28	How did the Founders create the presidency?	Carol Birkin, "Debating the Presidency Once Again," 116-148.	In retrospect, what is the biggest flaw with the presidency?
February 2	How do we think about presidential greatness?	Dennis Simon, "Public Expectations of the President," 135- 159.	NONE
February 4	How do we think about presidential greatness?	Mercieca & Vaughn, "The Rhetoric of Heroic Expectations," 1-20.	Is there anything wrong with treating the president as the nation's hero?
February 9	What are the tools of political communication?	1) McCombs and Shaw, "The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media," 176-187. 2) Robert Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," 51-58.	NONE

DATE	READ/WATCH	DUE	WRITING PROMPT
February 11	What are the tools of political communication?	1) Rubin, "Uses and Gratifications Theory on Media Effects," 165-178. 2) Gerbner, "Cultivation Analysis, an Overview," 3-11.	Who should have the power to set the nation's agenda?
February 16	How do we think about how the president communicates?	David Greenberg, "Beyond the Bully Pulpit," 22-29.	NONE
February 18	How do we think about how the president communicates?	David Zarefsky, "Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition," 607-619.	Does the president have too much power to communicate with the public?
February 23	Rhetorical presidency and the press	Noam Chomsky, "Media Control," 5-29.	NONE
February 25	Rhetorical presidency and the press	Noam Chomsky, "Media Control," 30-58.	How did media cooperation and public relations serve the presidency?
March 2  NO SCHOOL	NONE	NONE	NONE
March 4	Threats to the rhetorical presidency	Owen, "New Media and Political Campaigns," 1-20.	NONE
March 9	Threats to the rhetorical presidency	Obama & Romney campaign staff, "Campaigns and the Press," Electing the President, 48-80.	How did the mainstream media lose control over the agenda setting power?



DATE	READ/WATCH	DUE	WRITING PROMPT
March 11	The post-rhetorical presidency model	Hartnett & Mercieca, "A Discovered Dissembler Can Achieve Nothing Great"; Or, Four Theses on the Death of Presidential Rhetoric in an Age of Empire," 599-621.	NONE
March 16	The post-rhetorical presidency model	Mercieca, "Ignoring the President," 206-230.	What was lost with the emergence of the post-rhetorical presidency?
March 18	NONE	NONE	NONE
NO CLASS, attend Friday classes			
March 23	Outrage & the Attention Economy	Jeffrey Berry & Sarah Sobieraj, "The Outrage Industry," 3-26.	NONE
March 25	Outrage & the Attention Economy	Michael Goldhaber, "ATTENTION SHOPPERS!" 1-15.	Why are outrage and attention bad metrics for organizing our public sphere?
March 30	The Presidency & Demagoguery	James W. Ceaser, "Demagoguery Statesmanship and Presidential Politics," 75-117.	NONE
April 1	The Presidency & Demagoguery	Mercieca, "The Announcement Spectacle," <i>Demagogue for President</i> , 1-21.	Why is it dangerous for a presidential candidate to use demagoguery?
April 6	Trump & Distrust	Barbara A. Misztal, "Trust and cooperation: the democratic public sphere," 371-386.	NONE

DATE	READ/WATCH	DUE	WRITING PROMPT
April 8	Trump & Distrust	Mercieca, "Now, the poor guy. You gotta see this guy," <i>Demagogue for President</i> , 23-25 & 50-57.	Why do ad hominem attacks erode trust?
April 13	Trump & Polarization	Maxwell & Shields, "The Long Southern Strategy," 1-35.	NONE
April 15	Trump & Polarization	Mercieca, "I didn't tweet; I retweeted somebody that was supposedly an expert. Am I gonna check every statistic? All it was is a retweet. And it wasn't from me'," <i>Demagogue for President</i> , 71-72, 89-99.	Why use racism to increase polarization?
April 20	Trump & Frustration	Petty & Briñol, "Emotion and Persuasion," 1-27.	NONE
April 22	Trump & Frustration	Mercieca, "I. Am. Your. Voice!" <i>Demagogue for President</i> , 127-129, 189-214.	Why do authoritarian appeals work with a frustrated electorate?
April 27	Wrap-up discussion on the relationship between the press and the president.	Bring your questions about your final paper.	NONE
Final Exam Date: May 4, 2:00-4:30	FINAL PAPER DUE	Final Paper <b>DUE 4:40</b> pm (submit via ecampus)	