GOVT 1539
POLITICS OF THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

Jon Rogowski
rogowski@fas.harvard.edu
420 CGIS Knafel
617.495.4249
http://scholar.harvard.edu/rogowski
Office hours: Tuesdays, 3pm to 4pm.

Harvard University
Monday & Wednesdays, 11:07am–12:00pm.

Teaching Fellows
Michael Olson
michaelolson@g.harvard.edu
Office hours: Thursdays, 11am to 1pm
CGIS Knafel cafe
https://scholar.harvard.edu/michaelolson

Andrew Stone
arstone@g.harvard.edu
Office hours: Tuesdays, 4pm to 6pm
CGIS Knafel cafe
https://scholar.harvard.edu/stone

Course Description and Objectives

The president is the single most powerful and visible individual in the American political system. It has not always been this way. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, British academic Lord James Bryce dedicated an entire chapter to explaining why, as he saw it, “Great Men Are Not Chosen President” but instead tended to be so ordinary and commonplace. Fifty years later, Richard Neustadt, aide to President Harry Truman who subsequently taught at the Kennedy School of Government, wrote that the Constitution reduces presidents to “mere clerks.” Today, presidential power is as salient as it has ever been in our country’s history. Rarely does a day pass without finding an editorial in a major U.S. newspaper that laments the concentration of power in the presidency. And after one of the most divisive elections the U.S. has experienced, understanding the power of — and, just as importantly, the constraints on — the individual who inhabits the White House is a critical task for explaining our contemporary politics.

This course surveys the politics of presidential power in a system where power is separated between but also shared by adjoining branches of government. From this institutional perspective, the course will engage the following questions: What is presidential power? For what aims do presidents exercise their powers? When do
presidents successfully achieve their goals — and when do they fail? How do presidents manage relations with Congress? To what degree do presidents shape public opinion? What is presidential leadership and when is it most clearly exhibited? How do presidents approach questions of war and peace? What are the implications of presidential power for policy outcomes and the American political system? Through answering these questions, the course provides a deeper understanding of the factors that shape presidential power, its exercise, and the nature of the American system of government.

The course reading list is designed to offer diverse and sometimes competing perspectives on many of the key questions that animate debates about the presidency. Unfortunately, as with all such courses, limits on our time require that some topics receive less attention than they could. For example, the course will not provide a full treatment of topics such as bureaucratic politics, the Executive Office of the President, presidential rhetoric, the president’s relations with media, or the politics of presidential mandates. I encourage you to consider how the theoretical perspectives provided in the class might provide insight that is relevant for these and other topics. If you are interested in these or other topics that are not covered in depth, you might consider writing about them for your short response essays or research proposal. Along with the other subjects covered in the course, these would also be appropriate topics for a senior thesis.

While there are no formal prerequisites for this course, the material presumes that students possess a working understanding of the American political and electoral system. Students who feel deficient in this area are strongly encouraged to purchase the recommended textbooks.

The course is taught from the perspective of how an outsider — such as a journalist, foreign nation, member of Congress, or regular citizen — might make sense of a president’s behavior. To complement this perspective, however, several guest speakers may join the class throughout the term to provide additional insight about how to understand the presidency. I ask for your flexibility in accommodating speakers’ schedules and urge you to engage with them in a respectful manner.

**Course Meetings**

Two lectures are offered per week. Attending all lectures is a natural expectation of the course and students are responsible for all assigned readings. Students are also expected to attend their assigned course section, which will meet weekly beginning in the third week of the course. Four sections are planned: Tuesdays, 9am; Tuesdays, 10am; Thursdays, 10am; Fridays, 11am. These dates and times are subject to change pending room availability and enrollment. All readings should be completed prior to
the section meeting.

Course Requirements

Your evaluation for the course will be based on the components described below. All assignments are graded on a standard A through F grading scale; the course is not offered on a pass/fail basis.

Short responses and class engagement: 25%. Students are expected to complete three short essays which will be posted on the course’s Yellowdig site (accessed via Canvas). The goal of these assignments is to use and apply the material from the course to real-world politics. Students should submit a short response to an article from a major news source on some aspect of the American presidency. In no more than 250 words, students should use the material from the course to engage the claims made in the article. Based on our class discussions and readings, do you believe the author is correct or misguided? What has the author missed, overlooked, or misunderstood? What have political scientists missed, overlooked, or misunderstood? At the beginning of the third week of class, students will be randomly assigned to submit short response essays on three of the following dates: February 9; February 16; February 23; March 9; March 23; March 30; April 6; April 13; and April 20. Essays and links to relevant news articles should be posted to Yellowdig by 5pm on the assigned date.

Students are also expected and required to engage with their classmates’ postings on Yellowdig. Over the course of the semester, students must read and provide comments on 20 of their classmates’ posts, with no more than five in a single week. These responses need not be either formal or long; a few sentences is sufficient. However, they should engage the author in a constructive and considerate manner. These comments must be posted by April 27.

Essays will count two-thirds and responses to them will count one-third toward this component of the course grade.

Research project: 25%. Due Friday, May 11 by 5pm via email to the instructor and the relevant TF. It is likely our course will raise more questions for you than it will answer – and this is a good thing! Using the tools of social science inquiry, students should prepare an original research proposal on an empirically testable question related to the American presidency. We are swimming in more data than ever, and the goal for this project is to familiarize you with the mechanics of social science research and to develop skills as critical consumers of social science findings. The project may also help stimulate ideas for summer research, future junior sem-
inars, and potential senior thesis topics. The research paper should (a) identify a clear research question; (b) state a hypothesis supported by relevant argumentation; (c) identify data appropriate to the hypothesis; (d) explain how the data are useful for testing your hypothesis; and (e) discuss the stakes of your analyses for how we understand the presidency. Specific formatting guidelines, requirements, and benchmarks will be distributed in section.

**Section participation: 25%**. Students are expected to actively engage with the material in the course and their classmates. Sections will meet for one hour weekly beginning in the third week of class (February 5). Students are expected to attend and be active participants in their and their classmates’ learning. Participation will be assessed via attendance, contributions to discussion, and with occasional short quizzes.

**Exams (three): 25%**. Three exams will be held throughout the semester. The first exam will cover material discussed between January 22 and February 20. The second exam will cover material discussed between February 26 and March 27. The third exam will ask students to reflect upon material discussed throughout the course, with a particular emphasis on the themes discussed between April 2 and April 24. Each exam is open-book and open-note. The exams will be administered during class. Students will complete the exams on their own computers at a place of their choosing and will submit them via Canvas. Each exam will be administered in class and students will have the allotted class time to complete it. Students must notify the instructor of any conflicts no later than February 5. Make-up exams will not be permitted without documentation from a doctor or resident dean.

**Late assignments**

Late assignments are extremely discouraged and will be heavily penalized without a note from a doctor or resident dean. Written assignments will be penalized two-thirds of a letter grade (e.g., from B+ to B-) for every day late. Students will be unable to make up the exams without documentation from a doctor or university official.

**Academic integrity**

You are responsible for understanding and adhering to the Harvard College Honor Code ([https://honor.fas.harvard.edu/honor-code](https://honor.fas.harvard.edu/honor-code)). There are no excuses for failure to uphold academic integrity. For more information about upholding academic integrity, please visit the Harvard College Handbook for Students ([https://handbook.](https://handbook.))
Students are also encouraged to consult the Harvard Guide to Using Sources (https://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/), which makes available several anonymous open-learning tools.

**Collaboration**

Collaboration, discussion, and the exchange of ideas is essential to the course and to academic research more generally. You are permitted and in fact encouraged to discuss the material from the course with classmates and others. For instance, you may study with others and you may discuss your ideas for the short essays and the research paper with others. However, all submitted work must be your own. **Collaboration on the exams is strictly prohibited.** In addition to avoiding plagiarism, your written work must reflect your own ideas and your own writing.

**Accessibility**

Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (http://www.aeo.fas.harvard.edu) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the instructor’s inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential.

**Resources for writing**

We all need help with our writing. Fortunately, the Writing Center (http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr) is available for just this purpose — but it is vastly underutilized. Please do not hesitate to contact the Writing Center if you would like assistance with developing or communicating your ideas for the course’s written assignments.

**Technology in the classroom**

Depending on how it is used, technology can be an important classroom resource. It can also hinder your learning and your classmates’ learning. All cell phones must be set to silent in class lectures and section meetings. Texting, emailing, Facebooking, etc. during class is also not permitted via cell phone, laptop, iPad, or any other device. The use of laptops and iPads is permitted for the purposes of taking notes and accessing course materials. However, you should be aware that growing evidence shows that laptop use is associated with significantly worse classroom performance for users (see, e.g., http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/...
it can also distract your classmates and detract from their learning experience. The instructor reserves the right to prohibit the use of all electronic materials at his discretion if such a ban appears warranted.

Course readings

There is no required textbook. All course readings are available from the Documents section of the course Canvas site. Readings should be completed in advance of the class meeting for which they are listed. Completing the reading prior to class will enable students to get the most from that day’s lecture. A sound understanding of the assigned readings is also critical for effective section meetings.

The course reading list has been curated with multiple goals in mind. For instance, I have sought to provide a balance of: primary sources and secondary literature; classic perspectives and contemporary counterarguments; readings that highlight the value of social science research while also remaining accessible, and; normative and positive perspectives. As a result, the reading list is fairly long for some classes but varies in length from class to class. I encourage students to form reading groups that meet outside of class as a commitment device for completing and engaging with the readings.

While the course has no formal prerequisites, the course does presume familiarity with U.S. government. Students who wish to improve their background knowledge of the American presidency or the American political system are encouraged to purchase one or both of the following books:


Course schedule

January 22. Introduction.


Constitution of the United States, Article II (https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript#toc-article-ii-).

*The Federalist Papers*, #69 (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed69.asp) and #70 (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed70.asp).
January 29. Institutional change, American political development, and the presidency.


January 31. Perspectives on power.


February 5. Presidential success in Congress (part I)


February 7. Presidential success in Congress (part II)


February 12. Presidential success in Congress (part III)

February 14. Veto powers and the president’s legislative influence.


*The Federalist Papers*, #73 (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed73.asp).

February 19. Happy Presidents’ Day (no class)!

February 21. **EXAM #1.**


February 28. Presidential prerogative and unilateral powers (con’d).


March 5. Appointment powers and the courts.

The Federalist Papers, #76 (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed76.asp) and #77 (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed77.asp).


March 7. Judicial decision making and the president.


March 12 and 14. SPRING BREAK

March 19. Political control of the executive branch.


March 21. The two presidencies.

March 26. War and presidential power.


March 28. EXAM #2.

April 2. Presidents and the public: Leaders or followers?


April 4. Guest Speaker: Denis McDonough, Chief of Staff to President Barack Obama.


April 11. Holding presidents accountable.


April 16. Political change and the presidency.


April 18. Executive power and the constitutional order.


April 23. Executive power, democratic norms, and authoritarianism.


April 25. Guest Speaker: Reince Priebus, Chief of Staff to President Trump.

April 27. EXAM #3. Due by 5pm.