

**PRELIMINARY SYLLABUS: MATERIAL SUBJECT TO CHANGE**

**GOVT 1539**

**POLITICS OF THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY**

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**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. I encourage you to consider how the theoretical perspectives provided in the class might provide insight that is relevant for the topics we do not cover directly. If you are interested in topics beyond those covered by our class lectures, you might consider writing about them for your research project. 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. *Note: the class schedule contains two placeholder class dates at the end of April. Several guest speakers are tentatively scheduled as of now; once their dates are confirmed the class schedule will be shifted accordingly.* I ask for your flexibility in accommodating speakers' schedules and believe you will find them a valuable addition to our class discussions.

## 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; Wednesdays, 3pm; Wednesdays, 4:30pm; and Thursdays, 10:30am. 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: 15%.** 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. At the end of the second week of class, students will be randomly assigned to three due dates over the course of the semester. The due dates will include: February 15, March 1, March 8, March 29, April 5, and April 12. For each due date, there will be a prompt to which students should respond. In approximately 250-500 words, students should use the material from the course to respond to the prompt. Responses should be posted to Yellowdig by 5pm on the assigned date, and should include any external links (news stories, documents, speeches, etc.) that were used in answering the prompt.

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 10 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 19.

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

**Research project: 30%.** Due Friday, May 17 by 5pm via Canvas. 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 project 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 seminars, 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 and collect data appropriate to the hypothesis; (d) explain how the data are useful for testing your hypothesis; (e) use the data to test your hypothesis; and (f) discuss the implications of your analyses for how we understand the presidency. Specific formatting guidelines, requirements, and benchmarks will be distributed in section.

**Section participation: 15%.** 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 11). 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): 40%.** Three exams will be held throughout the semester. The first exam will cover material discussed between January 28 and February 20. The second exam will cover material discussed between February 25 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 1 and April 29. 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 8. 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>). 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.fas.harvard.edu/book/academic-integrity>). 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/S0272775716307129>); 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.

The readings on this list serve various purposes. Some of the readings provide background on a particular topic. Others of them provide commentary or perspective on a topic of contemporary interest. Still others provide examples of academic research that use the tools of social science research to provide insight into the presidency. As such, not all of the readings will be discussed at length in lecture or in section. The collection of them, however, is intended to provide a diverse set of perspectives on topics that animate discussions about the contemporary presidency.

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:

Lowi, Theodore J., Benjamin Ginsberg, Kenneth A. Shepsle, and Stephen Ansolabehere. 2016. *American Government: Power and Purpose*, 14th Edition. New York: W.W. Norton.

Milkis, Sidney M., and Michael Nelson. 2016. *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776—2014*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

## Course schedule

January 28. Introduction.

January 30. Colonial origins.

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

Declaration of Independence (<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>).

*The Federalist Papers*, #69 ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed69.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed69.asp)) and #70 ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed70.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed70.asp)).

*Optional*: Eric Nelson. 2014. *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Introduction.

February 4. Historical development and institutional transformation.

Sidney Milkis and Michael Nelson. 2014. *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776–2014*. Chapters 3 and 8.

*Optional*: Woodrow Wilson. 1908. *Constitutional Government in the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press. Chapter 3.

February 6. Presidential-Congressional relations: Informal influences.

Richard Neustadt. 1990. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. New York: Free Press. Introduction, chapters 1 and 3.

*Skim*: Brandice Canes-Wrone and Scott de Marchi. 2002. "Presidential Approval and Legislative Success." *Journal of Politics* 64: 491-509.

*Skim*: Frances E. Lee. 2008. "Dividers, Not Uniters: Presidential Leadership and Senate Partisanship, 1981-2004." *Journal of Politics* 70: 914-928.

February 11. Presidential-Congressional relations: Formal influences.

Keith Krehbiel. 1998. *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 2 and 7.

George C. Edwards III. 2017 "No Deal: Donald Trump's Leadership of Congress." *The Forum*.

February 13. Presidential vetoes.

Charles M. Cameron. 2009. "The Presidential Veto." In *The Oxford Handbook of the American Presidency*. George C. Edwards III and William G. Howell, editors. New York: Oxford University Press.

Julia Hirschfeld Davis. 2015. "In Wielding Rarely Used Veto, President Obama Puts Budget Heat on Republicans." *New York Times*. October 22, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/23/us/politics/obama-vetoes-defense-bill-deepening-budget-fight-with-gop.html>

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

February 18. Happy Presidents' Day (no class)!

February 20. Presidential prerogative and unilateral powers.

William Howell. 2005. "Unilateral Powers: A Brief Overview." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*.

William G. Howell. 2013. *Thinking about the Presidency*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapter 1.

Tara Golshan. 2018. "Why Trump can raise steel tariffs without Congress." *Vox*, March 8. <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/8/17097206/trump-tariffs-congress>.

Concurrent opinion by Justice Robert Jackson in *Youngstown Sheet Tube Co. v. Sawyer*: <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/343/579/case.html#634>.

February 25. **EXAM #1.**

February 27. Appointment powers and the courts.

*The Federalist Papers*, #76 ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed76.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed76.asp)) and #77 ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed77.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed77.asp)).

John Patty and Tom Clark. 2016. "The game theory behind Mitch McConnell's Supreme Court strategy." *Vox*, February 23, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2016/2/23/11099096/mcconnell-preemptively-obstruct>

*The Economist*. 2018. "Donald Trump's judicial appointments may prove his most enduring legacy." January 11, 2018. <https://www.economist.com/node/21734409>

March 4. GUEST SPEAKERS: SENATOR HEIDI HEITKAMP AND MR. GARY COHN.

March 6. Presidents and the judiciary.

Jeff Yates and Andrew Whitford. 1998. "Presidential Power and the United States Supreme Court." *Political Research Quarterly* 51: 539-550.

Keith E. Whittington. 2001. "Presidential Challenges to Judicial Supremacy and the Politics of Constitutional Meaning." *Polity* 33: 365-395.

Adam Liptak. 2017. "Why Obama Struggled at Court, and Trump May Strain to Do Better." *New York Times*, January 23. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/us/politics/obama-supreme-court-win-rate-trump.html>

March 11. Political control of the executive branch.

David E. Lewis and Terry M. Moe. 2013. "The Presidency and the Bureaucracy: The Levers of Presidential Control." In Michael Nelson, ed., *The Presidency and the Political System*, pages 374-405.

Sanford C. Gordon. 2011. "Politicizing Agency Spending Authority: Lessons from a Bush-era Scandal." *American Political Science Review* 105:717-734.

Lisa Rein and Andrew Ba Tran. 2017. "How the Trump era is changing the federal bureaucracy." *Washington Post*, December 30. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-the-trump-era-is-changing-the-federal-bureaucracy/2017/12/30/8d5149c6-daa7-11e7-b859-fb0995360725\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.e08ef8ca24bc](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-the-trump-era-is-changing-the-federal-bureaucracy/2017/12/30/8d5149c6-daa7-11e7-b859-fb0995360725_story.html?utm_term=.e08ef8ca24bc).

Anonymous. 2018. "I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration." *New York Times*, September 5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html>

March 13. Domestic policy, foreign policy, and the two presidencies.

Brandice Canes-Wrone, William G. Howell, and David E. Lewis. 2008. "Toward a Broader Understanding of Presidential Power: A Reevaluation of the Two Presidencies Thesis." *Journal of Politics* 70: 1-16.

Aaron Wildavsky. 1966. "The Two Presidencies." *Trans-Action* 4: 7-14.

Dara Lind. 2017. "Does Trump need congressional approval to strike Syria? The debate, explained." *Vox*, April 7. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/4/7/15217832/aumf-trump-syria-congress>.

William G. Howell and Jon C. Pevehouse. 2007. "When Congress Stops Wars." *Foreign Affairs* September/October: 95-107. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2007-09-01/when-congress-stops-wars>.

Gene Healy and John Glaser. 2018. "Repeal, Don't Replace, Trump's War Powers." *New York Times*, April 17. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/17/opinion/repeal-replace-trump-war-powers.html>.

March 18 and 20. **SPRING BREAK**

March 25. Wars, foreign affairs, and the presidency.

William G. Howell, Saul P. Jackman, and Jon C. Rogowski. 2013. *The Wartime President: Executive Influence and the Nationalizing Politics of Threat*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 1-2; skim 4-5. Available through HOLLIS.

Michael Tomz. 2007. "Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach." *International Organization* 61: 821-840.

The APSA Task Force on U.S. Standing in World Affairs. 2009. "Think Again: America's Image." *Foreign Policy* (available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/05/think-again-americas-image/>).

Jen Kirby. 2018. "Trump has threatened to withdraw from NAFTA. What next?" Vox (available at <https://www.vox.com/2018/12/4/18123809/usmca-trump-nafta-withdrawal-congress>), December 4.

March 27. GUEST SPEAKER: AMBASSADOR NICHOLAS BURNS.

April 1. **EXAM #2.**

April 3. Presidents, publics, and representation.

Douglas Kriner and Andrew Reeves. 2015. "Presidential Particularism and Divide-the-Dollar Politics." *American Political Science Review* 109: 155-171.

Samuel Kernell. 2006. *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*. Fourth edition. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press. Chapters 1 and 2.

Brandice Canes-Wrone and Jason P. Kelly. 2013. "The Obama Presidency, Public Position-Taking, and Mass Opinion." *Polity* 45: 85-104.

April 8. Incentives for presidential leadership.

Brandice Canes-Wrone, Michael C. Herron and Kenneth W. Shotts. 2001. "Leadership and Pandering: A Theory of Executive Policymaking." *American Journal of Political Science* 45: 532-550.

James Alt, Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, and Shanna Rose. "Disentangling Accountability and Competence in Elections: Evidence from U.S. Term Limits." *Journal of Politics* 73:171-186.

April 10. Oversight and accountability.

Brendan Nyhan. 2015. "Scandal Potential: How Political Context and News Congestion Affect the President's Vulnerability to Media Scandal." *British Journal of Political Science* 45: 435-466.

Andy Sullivan. 2012. "It's not just the economy: Why football and sharks can affect elections." Reuters, October 6, 2012. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-campaign-uninformed-voters/its-not-just-the-economy-why-football-and-sharks-can-affect-elections-idUSBRE89503720121006>.

Doug Kriner and Eric Schickler. 2018. "What can House Democrats accomplish with their new oversight and investigative powers?" *Washington Post*. Available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/11/28/what-can-house-democrats-accomplish-with-their-new-oversight-and-investigative-powers/?utm\\_term=.408959c912c6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/11/28/what-can-house-democrats-accomplish-with-their-new-oversight-and-investigative-powers/?utm_term=.408959c912c6).

April 15. Norms and the presidency.

Julia R. Azari and Jennifer K. Smith. 2012. "Unwritten Rules: Informal Institutions in Established Democracies." *Perspectives on Politics* 10: 37-55.

Jack Goldsmith. 2017. "Will Donald Trump Destroy the Presidency?" *The Atlantic*; available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/will-donald-trump-destroy-the-presidency/537921/>.

Brendan Nyhan. 2017. "Norms Matter." *Politico*, September/October. Available at <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/why-norms-matter-politics-trump-215535>.

*skim*: Daphna Renan. 2018. "Presidential Norms and Article II." *Harvard Law Review* 131:2206-2242.

April 17. Executive power and the constitutional order.

William G. Howell and Terry M. Moe. 2016. *Relic: How Our Constitution Undermines Effective Governance — And Why We Need a More Powerful Presidency*. Chapters 3 and 4.

William G. Howell and Terry M. Moe. 2018. “Why the President Needs More Power.” *Boston Review*, July 2; available at <http://bostonreview.net/politics/william-howell-terry-m-moe-why-president-needs-more-power>.

April 22. Impeachment.

Notes on the impeachment of Andrew Johnson. From Gillman, Graber, and Whittington, *American Constitutionalism*, Volume 1. Available at [http://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/fdscontent/uscompanion/us/static/companion.websites/gillman/instructor/Chapter\\_6/note\\_on\\_the\\_impeachment\\_of\\_andrew\\_johnson.pdf](http://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/fdscontent/uscompanion/us/static/companion.websites/gillman/instructor/Chapter_6/note_on_the_impeachment_of_andrew_johnson.pdf).

Gene Healy. 2017. “Americans Should Impeach Presidents More Often.” *Reason* (available at <https://reason.com/archives/2017/07/16/americans-should-impeach-presi>).

Keith E. Whittington. 2017. “So what exactly counts as an impeachable offense?” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/24/so-what-exactly-counts-as-an-impeachable-offense-spoiler-its-a-trick-question/?utm\\_term=.b5898e83f7bd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/24/so-what-exactly-counts-as-an-impeachable-offense-spoiler-its-a-trick-question/?utm_term=.b5898e83f7bd)

April 24. American democracy in the age of Trump.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown. Introduction and Chapter 1.

Theodore Lowi. 1986. *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled*. Chapters 1 and 6.

April 29. GUEST SPEAKER: PROFESSOR DAVID GERGEN.

Excerpt from *Eyewitness to Power*: <https://www.npr.org/books/titles/194207442/eyewitness-to-power-the-essence-of-leadership-nixon-to-clinton>

May 1. **EXAM #3** (or substitute op-ed assignment due by 10:30am).

May 17. Final research paper due, 5pm.