

GOVT E-1540

POLITICS OF THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

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Spring 2017.

Monday & Wednesdays, 11:07am–12:00pm.

Teaching Fellows

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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. 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 which will be taped and made available for viewing online. Viewing all lectures is a natural expectation of the course and students are responsible for all assigned readings. All readings should be completed prior to that course meeting. In addition, a taped section meeting will also be made available beginning in week 3.

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: 40%. 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 several of the following dates: February 9; February 16; February 23; March 9; March 23; March 30; April 6; April 13; and April 20. Students taking the course for undergraduate credit are responsible for four short essays; graduate credit requires six short essays. 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 30 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: 30%. 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 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 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. Students taking the course for graduate credit will also be responsible for collecting and analyzing relevant data for evaluating the proposed hypothesis. Specific formatting guidelines, requirements, and benchmarks will be distributed in section.

Exams (three): 30%. 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. Students will have one hour to complete the exam within a 24-hour period. Students will complete the exams on their own computers and submit them via Canvas. Make-up exams will not be permitted without appropriate documentation.

Late assignments

Late assignments are extremely discouraged and will be heavily penalized without a note from a doctor or appropriate university official. 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 Harvard Extension School policies on academic integrity (www.extension.harvard.edu/resources-policies/student-conduct/academic-integrity) and how to use sources responsibly. Not knowing the rules, misunderstanding the rules, running out of time, submitting the wrong draft, or being overwhelmed with multiple demands are not acceptable excuses. There are no excuses for failure to uphold academic integrity. For information about academic citation rules, please visit the Harvard Extension School Tips to Avoid Plagiarism (www.extension.harvard.edu/resources-policies/resources/tips-avoid-plagiarism), where you will find links to the Harvard Guide to Using Sources and two free online 15-minute tutorials to test your knowledge of academic citation policy. The tutorials are 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. Students may not work together on any of the exams. In addition to avoiding plagiarism, your written work must reflect your own ideas and your own writing.

Accessibility

The Extension School is committed to providing an accessible academic community. The Accessibility Office offers a variety of accommodations and services to students with documented disabilities. Please visit www.extension.harvard.edu/resources-policies/resources/disability-services-accessibility for more information. Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessibility Office and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term.

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.

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:

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 22. Introduction.

January 24. Colonial origins.

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

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

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

January 31. Perspectives on power.

- 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.
- William G. Howell. 2013. *Thinking about the Presidency*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapter 1.
- Harvey C. Mansfield. 1989. *Taming the Prince: The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power*. New York: Free Press. Chapter 1.

February 5. Presidential success in Congress (part I)

- Keith Krehbiel. 1998. *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 2 and 7.
- George C. Edwards III, Andrew Barrett and Jeffrey Peake. 1997. "The Legislative Impact of Divided Government." *American Journal of Political Science* 41: 545-563.

February 7. Presidential success in Congress (part II)

- Matthew N. Beckmann. 2008. "The President's Playbook: White House Strategies for Lobbying Congress." *Journal of Politics* 70: 407-419.
- Frances E. Lee. 2008. "Dividers, Not Unifiers: Presidential Leadership and Senate Partisanship, 1981-2004." *Journal of Politics* 70: 914-928.

February 12. Presidential success in Congress (part III)

- Brandice Canes-Wrone and Scott de Marchi. 2002. "Presidential Approval and Legislative Success." *Journal of Politics* 64: 491-509.
- Brendan Nyhan. 2017. "Why Trump's Base of Support May Be Smaller Than It Seems." *New York Times*, July 19, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/19/upshot/why-trumps-base-of-support-may-be-smaller-than-it-seems.html>

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

- 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).

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

February 21. **EXAM #1.**

February 26. Presidential prerogative and unilateral powers.

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

Aaron Kaufman and Jon C. Rogowski. 2018. "Interbranch Conflict, Unilateral Action, and the Presidency." Typescript.

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

Joshua B. Kennedy. 2015. "'Do This! Do That!' and Nothing Will Happen': Executive Orders and Bureaucratic Responsiveness." *American Politics Research* 43: 59-82.

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>.

Michiko Kakutani. 2007. "The Case that the President's Reach Exceeds His Grasp." *New York Times*, September 25, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/25/books/25kaku.html>

March 5. Appointment powers and the courts.

Keith E. Whittington. 2009. "Judicial Checks on the Presidency." In *The Oxford Handbook of the American Presidency*. Cambridge, UK: Oxford University Press.

The Federalist Papers, #76 (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed76.asp) and #77 (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/mischief-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 7. Judicial decision making and the president.

Michael Bailey, Brian Kamoie, and Forrest Maltzman. 2005. "Signals from the Tenth Justice: The Political Role of the Solicitor General in Supreme Court Decision Making." *American Journal of Political Science* 49: 72-85.

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 12 and 14. **SPRING BREAK**

March 19. 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.

March 21. 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.

March 26. War and presidential power.

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.

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>

March 28. **EXAM #2.**

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

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

Brandice Canes-Wrone. 2004. "The Public Presidency, Personal Approval Ratings, and Policy Making." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34: 477-492.

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

April 9. Presidential representation.

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

Jeremy D. Bailey. 2014. "Opposition to the Theory of Presidential Representation: Federalists, Whigs, and Republicans." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 44: 50-71.

Andy Sullivan. 2012. "It's not just the economy: Why football and sharks can affect elections." Reuters, October 6, 2012.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-campaign-uninformed-voters/its-not-just-the-economy-why-football-and-sharks-can-affect-elections-idUSBRE89503720121006>

April 11. Holding presidents accountable.

Dino P. Christenson and Douglas L. Kriner. 2015. "Political Constraints on Unilateral Executive Action." *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 65: 897-931.

Jack Goldsmith. 2012. *Power and Constraint: The Accountable Presidency after 9/11*. New York: W.W. Norton. Chapter 7.

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

April 16. Political change and the presidency.

Stephen Skowronek. 1993. *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton*, chapters 1-3.

Stephen Skowronek. “Is Donald Trump the Great Disrupter? Probably not.” *Washington Post*, April 24, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/is-donald-trump-the-great-disrupter-probably-not/2017/04/24/99c86938-25d9-11e7-bb9d-8cd6118e1409_story.html?utm_term=.31248d094621

April 18. 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.

Eric A. Posner and Adrian Vermeule. 2009. “Tyrannophobia.” Typescript.

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

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

Juan J. Linz. 1990. “The Perils of Presidentialism.” *Journal of Democracy* 1: 51-69.

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

April 25. **EXAM #3.**