GOVT E-1540

POLITICS OF THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

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Monday & Wednesdays, 10:30am–11:30am.

Teaching Fellow

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Office hours/section meetings: Mondays,
3pm to 5pm.

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 several placeholder class dates at the end of April. Two 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 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, an option section meeting will also be made available beginning in week 3 which can be accessed via Zoom.
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: 30%**. Students are expected to complete six 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. 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. The prompts will be provided on Yellowdig by the Monday morning of the week in which the assignments are due. 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 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 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 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 would be useful for testing your hypothesis; (e) discuss the implications of your analyses for how we understand the presidency. Specific formatting guidelines, requirements, and benchmarks will be distributed through your teaching fellow.
**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. Students will have one hour to complete the exam within the 24-hour period after it becomes available. 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.

**Graduate credit**. Students receiving graduate credit for the course will be required to complete one additional short writing assignment of approximately 750 words. The assignment will be due on May 1 by 10:30am. The assignment prompt will be provided via Canvas on April 15. The grading for the prompt will be included with the research project component of the grade, and will change the relative weight of the research project to 20% with the additional essay counting 10%.

**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](http://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](http://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. **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**

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](http://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.

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:


**Course schedule**


January 30. Colonial origins.

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).

Introduction.

February 4. Historical development and institutional transformation.


February 13. Presidential vetoes.


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

February 18. Happy Presidents’ Day (no class)!
February 20. Presidential prerogative and unilateral powers.


February 25. EXAM #1.

February 27. 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 4. GUEST SPEAKERS: SENATOR HEIDI HEITKAMP AND MR. GARY COHN.

March 6. Presidents and the judiciary.


March 11. Political control of the executive branch.


March 18 and 20. SPRING BREAK

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


March 27. GUEST SPEAKER: AMBASSADOR NICHOLAS BURNS.

April 1. **EXAM #2.**

April 3. Presidents, publics, and representation.


April 8. Incentives for presidential leadership.


April 10. Oversight and accountability.


April 15. Norms and the presidency.


April 17. Executive power and the constitutional order.


April 22. Impeachment.


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.
May 1. Op-Ed assignment due, 10:30am (for students enrolled for graduate credit).
May 17. Final research paper due, 5pm.