

Pol Sci 342: The American Presidency

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“Being president is like running a cemetery: you’ve got a lot of people under you and nobody’s listening.”

– Bill Clinton

“[W]e’re prima donnas [...] That’s the reason we’re here. He wants to be the only prima donna but we’re going to show him there are three branches of government and he can’t be the only one!”

– Sen. Burton Wheeler

The president is the people who work for him.

–*House of Cards*

Description

This course provides a political science perspective on the American presidency. Our objective is to cut through common narratives provided by pundits, politicians, journalists, and the average voter to understand when presidents are more (or less) likely to influence public policy. Put simply, when (and how) do presidents exercise power? Answers to this question are both complicated and difficult to evaluate.

We begin with a brief normative and historical perspective on the presidency: what presidential power *ought* to be, and how the presidency came to be what it is today. We then discuss the president’s interactions with Congress, the judiciary, and the bureaucracy; the president’s foreign policy and war powers, as well as mechanisms of public accountability (public opinion, elections, investigations and scandals).

We will also use contemporary events during the Trump administration and the 2016 presidential election to apply the ideas from the readings. The course draws on wide variety of material—from political theory, to news articles, laws, court opinions, and quantitative analyses. It is designed for those interested in careers in social science, law, government, politics, or journalism—as well as anyone interested in American politics and the presidency, more generally.

Objectives

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Describe the constitutional design of the presidency, as well as competing interpretations and predictions about that design.
- Describe the historical development of the presidency as an institution.
- Identify causal arguments.
- Describe alternative ways of studying the presidency.
- Explain what conditions lead presidents to be more or less successful enacting a legislative agenda.
- Explain why (and when) Congress gives presidents institutional resources.
- Explain how Congress, the Judiciary, and the bureaucracy check presidential power.
- Describe the conditions that enable presidents to “act alone.”
- Assess the President’s relative influence in foreign affairs and how this impacts domestic policy.
- Explain how presidents influence (or are influenced by) public opinion.
- Articulate normative arguments for and against institutional reform of the presidency.

Course materials

No textbook will be required for this course. All materials will be available on Blackboard or third-party webpages.

Instructional Approach

Class time will involve a mix of traditional lectures, reading discussions, and in-class group assignments. Students should come to class prepared to discuss the readings in detail—sustained, productive conversation requires collective action.

Course Policies

- *Electronic devices.* No electronic devices (e.g. laptops, tablets, cell phones, etc.) may be used during class without permission—except during pre-specified class periods labeled on the course schedule. **You should print all readings before class.** A growing body of research finds that the use of laptops **hinders learning** for the people who use them and the students around them. In addition, **research suggests** that students who take handwritten notes process information better than those who type notes. Please remember to turn off or silence your phones prior to class.
- *Academic Integrity.* Students at WashU are bound by the Honor Code, which prohibits **academic fraud**. In accordance with faculty **guidelines**, any offenses will be reported. Regardless of the outcome of any investigation or trial by committee, any student who is found to have cheated or plagiarized on any assignment will receive a failing grade for the course.
- *Students with disabilities.* **Federal law** requires reasonable accommodations be made for students with disabilities. At WashU, the **Cornerstone** center handles all formal academic accommodations. Students with accommodation letters are encouraged to see the instructor during office hours within the first week of class.
- *Grade Appeals.* If you disagree with an evaluation of your work, you must wait 24 hours and write a brief paragraph detailing why you believe your grade is incorrect. This may result in a lowering of the original grade if further mistakes are found upon second reading. Note, simple coding errors on quizzes and grade-entry will be corrected without the need for appeal. Note, **no adjustments will be made to final grades under any circumstances.**
- *Late Assignments.* No late assignments will be accepted—except in the case of a serious emergency brought to my attention in advance of the due date. Note, in light of **Dropbox**, etc. computer failures are not emergencies. Be prepared.

Evaluation

Course grades will be based on the assignments and exams below. These “real” grades will then be **augmented** to reflect the distribution of grades in the typical 300-level political science course the WashU. All assignment grades will be updated and available on Blackboard within 48 hours of due date. Grading scale: $100 \geq A \geq 95 > A- \geq 90 > B+ \geq 86 > B \geq 82 > B- \geq 80 > C+ \geq 76 > C \geq 72 > C- \geq 70 > D+ \geq 66 > D \geq 62 > D- \geq 60 > F$.

Reading Quizzes – 10%

The vast majority of classes will begin with a three-question quiz to incentivize daily reading. These questions will be simple—either multiple choice or fill-in-the-blank—and designed to determine whether you completed the reading.

In-Class Assignments – 20%

Several class periods will include group-based assignments designed to develop analytical thinking skills. You will work in small groups to evaluate alternative points of view and design hypothetical policy changes. Standards of evaluation on these assignments will be specified at the outset of each task.

Exam – 30%

A closed-book, in-class exam will cover central concepts and course material, and will include a mix of short answer (2-3 sentence) and essay (2-3 paragraph) questions. All questions that could appear on the exam will be provided on **April 13th**. The exam is **April 20th**.

Team Research Project – 40%

You will work in a research project of your choosing. Your team will have three broad tasks: select a topic; determine a division of labor; produce a project write-up of 8,000 words describing your topic and findings. Teams must submit a 150-word topic abstract and division of labor plan by **February 3rd**. Team write-up is due on **May 4th**.

Course schedule

Readings, activities, and assignment due dates are listed below.

January 17: Course overview

- Please download the Socratic App prior to class.
- Kenneth Shepsle, *Analyzing Politics*, pg 1-6, 10-12, 445-469 [29]

January 19: Presidential power, public expectations, and the founding

- Article II, U.S. Constitution [3]
- George Clinton, *Cato 67* [3]
- Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist No. 69* [8]
- Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Gov. in the United States*, Ch. 3 [28]

January 24: The development of the “modern” presidency, part 1

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

January 26: The development of the “modern” presidency, part 2

- Sidney Milkis and Michael Nelson, *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776–2014*, Ch. 10
- In-class assignment: *Historical states of the union*

January 31: Research project introduction

- John Gerring and Dino Christenson, *An Applied Guide to Social Science Methodology*, Ch. 2 [18]
- John Gerring, “General Advice on Social Science Writing” [11]
- [10 Things to Know About Reading a Regression Table](#)
- In-class assignment: *Form/meet research team*

February 2: Studying the presidency

- Gary King, “The Methodology of Presidency Research” [22]
- Michael Nelson, “James David Barber and the Psychological Presidency” [18]
- In-class assignment: *Finalize research abstract/division of labor*

February 7: Pushing a legislative agenda, part 1

- Jeffery Cohen, Jon Bond, and Richard Fleisher, “Placing Presidential-Congressional Relations in Context: A Comparison of Barack Obama and His Predecessors” [21]

February 9: Pushing a legislative agenda, part 2

- Matthew Beckmann, *Pushing the Agenda: Presidential Leadership in U.S. Lawmaking, 1953–2004*, Ch. 3 [37]
- In-class assignment: *How successful will President Trump be?*

February 14: Divided government and congressional gridlock

- David Brady and Craig Volden, *Revolving Gridlock: Politics and Policy from Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush*, Ch.1-2 [42]

February 16: Judicial checks, part 1

- *Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co. v. Charles Sawyer, Secretary of Commerce* (1952) [37]

February 21: Judicial checks, part 2

- *National Labor Relations Board v. Noel Canning et al.* (2014)

February 23: Judicial influence

- Michael Bailey, Brian Kamoie, and Forrest Maltzman, “Signals from the Tenth Justice: The Political Role of the Solicitor General in Supreme Court Decision Making” [12]
- Keith Krehbiel, “Supreme Court Appointments as a Move-the-Median Game” [9]

- John Patty, “The game theory behind Mitch McConnell’s Supreme Court strategy” [2]
- Tim Johnson and Jason Roberts, “Presidential Capital and the Supreme Court Confirmation Process” [18]

February 28: Unilateral action, part 1

- William Howell, “Unilateral Powers: A Brief Overview” [21]
- Dhrumil Mehta, “Every President’s Executive Orders In One Chart” [1]
- Executive Order 10340 [2]
- In-class assignment: *Drafting unilateral action*

March 2: Unilateral action, part 2

- “To Revoke or Not Revoke?: The Political Determinants of Executive Order Longevity,” Sharece Thrower

March 7: Managing the bureaucracy, part 1

- *An American Presidency: Institutional Foundations of Executive Politics*, Ch. 9, William Howell

March 9: Managing the bureaucracy, part 2

- James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies do and why they do it*, Ch. 14 [20]
- In-class assignment: *Avoiding presidential orders*

March 14: No class

March 16: No class

March 21: Distributive politics

- Douglas Kriner and Andrew Reeves, *The Particularistic President: Executive Politics and Political Inequality*
- Jon Rogowski, “Presidential Influence in an Era of Congressional Dominance”

March 23: War powers, part 1

- Brandice Canes-Wrone, William Howell, and David Lewis, “Toward a Broader Understanding of Presidential Power: A Reevaluation of the Two Presidencies Thesis” [14]
- 9/11 AUMF [2]
- In-class assignment: *Drafting an AUMF*

March 28: War powers, part 2

- William Howell and Jon Rogowski, “War, the Presidency, and Legislative Voting Behavior” [15]

March 30: War powers, part 3

- *Presidential War Power*, Ch. 9-10
- In-class assignment: *Research group meeting and workshop*

April 4: Presidential elections

- Lynn Vavreck, *The Message Matters: The Economy and Presidential Campaigns*, Ch. 2-3 [31]
- Nicholas Confessore and Karen Yourish, “[Measuring Donald Trump’s Mammoth Advantage in Free Media](#)”
- Robert Erikson and Christopher Wlezien, “Forecasting US Presidential Elections Using Economic and Noneconomic Fundamentals” [4]

April 6: No class

April 11: Public opinion and persuasion

- *Who Leads Whom? Presidents, Policy, and the Public*, Ch. 3, Brandice Canes-Wrone
- Peter Wallsten, “[Retooling Obama’s campaign machine for the long haul](#)” [2]
- Robert Pear, “[Warring Sides on Health Care Carry Their Fight to TV and Radio Ads](#)” [2]

April 13: Media relations and scandal – exam questions distributed

- Brendan Nyhan, “Scandal Potential: How Political Context and News Congestion Affect the President’s Vulnerability to Media Scandal” [25]

April 18: Congressional investigations and impeachment

- Douglas Kriner and Eric Schickler, “Investigating the President: Committee Probes and Presidential Approval, 1953–2006” [16]
- Article II, Section 4, U.S. Constitution

April 20: In-class exam

April 25: Research workshop

- In-class assignment: *Meet in research teams; exchange early drafts of write-up with other teams; present materials to instructor for comment*

April 27: Reform and closing thoughts

- William Howell and Terry Moe, *Relic: How Our Constitution Undermines Effective Government - and Why We Need a More Powerful Presidency*, Ch. 4 [37]
- In-class assignment: *Proposing reform*

May 4: Research project due

- *Project due prior to midnight; no late projects will be accepted.*

Team research project

This course provided a broad introduction to social science research on the presidency. As with any research program, many questions and topics remain uninvestigated or the subject of serious debate. Your task is to work in a small research team to investigate a new or contested political phenomenon relating to the American presidency.

The purpose of this “team” model is twofold. First, a team-based project reduces the individual labor required to complete the assignment—and, as a result, reduces needless student fatigue. Second, this same division of labor allows us teams to leverage diverse skill-sets, which produces a better final product. One drawback to this model is that it requires coordination costs absent in individual projects. To reduce these, teams will be allotted class time to make progress on several of the tasks below. Note, teams will be held collectively responsible for the quality of their project.

Selecting a topic

Your team may choose from any (or none) of the following sample topics:

- “Tracking bureaucratic resistance in the Trump administration”;
- “Do words matter? Presidents and market prices”;
- “Federalism and the Trump administration”;
- “Presidents and the designation of public lands”;
- “Presidential pardons”;
- “Presidents and faithful execution of the law.”
- “Presidents and awarding federal contracts”;
- “ ‘Going public’ on Twitter”;
- “Federalism and the Trump administration”;
- “Presidents and crises”;
- “Public opinion as a constraint on presidential power”;
- “How much influence do presidents have over the unemployment rate?”

We will “preview” these sample topics in lecture on **January 31st**. Topic selection will be completed in-class by **February 2**. Students should come to class on February 2 with a topic in mind after some initial, preliminary research. Groups are welcome to choose any topic that interests them.

Project write-up

Project write-ups will be due by the end of the day on **May 4th**. The write-up must be around 8,000 words and include the following sections:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the project and research question, which should explain why the topic is important
- **Background:** a section that contains necessary historical/background information, as well as summarizes any existing scholarship or popular writing about the topic
- **Argument:** a section that describes your team’s theory about the topic, that should be logically coherent and address/consider potential challenges or alternative theories.
- **Evidence:** a section that describes the material (case studies, polls, interviews, other observational data) collected by the group; and discusses how that information supports or does not support the argument.
- **Discussion:** a section that describes the limitations of the project—what it does not answer, what could have been done, what we don’t know, etc.
- **Conclusion:** a section that briefly summarizes any concrete conclusions or takeaways from the project.

Evaluation

Projects receive a single grade based on the following rubric:

Criterion (pts)	A-standard
Thesis (15)	Presents a clear research question and answers it
Organization (10)	Is logically organized and stays on-topic
Background (15)	Demonstrates an understanding of and provides relevant context
Literature (10)	Demonstrates familiarity with all relevant existing research
Argument (15)	Presents a logical argument that addresses relevant alternatives
Evidence (15)	Evaluates the above argument with multiple sources of high-quality information
Limitations (12)	Identifies what the project failed to learn and what would be required to learn it
Quality of text (8)	Communicates clearly and is generally free of typographical, spelling, and grammatical errors.