

PLSC 10400

POLITICS OF THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

Jon Rogowski

jrogowski@uchicago.edu

523 Pick Hall

<http://voices.uchicago.edu/jrogowski>

Office hours: Tuesdays, 5pm to 6pm.

University of Chicago

Winter 2026. Henry Hinds Laboratory for Geophysical Sciences 101.

Tuesdays & Thursdays, 3:30pm–4:50pm.

Teaching Assistants

Luke Cain

lhcain@uchicago.edu

Section: Mon, 9:30am to 10:30am

Location: Green 108

Office hours: Mon, 3pm to 4pm

Location: Pick 407

Brady Earley

bearley@uchicago.edu

Section: Fri, 9:30am to 10:30am

Location: Green 108

Office hours: Wed, 2:30pm to 3:30pm

Location: Pick 407

Megan Maxwell

maxwellm@uchicago.edu

Section: Mon, 10:30am to 11:30am

Location: Green 108

Office hours: Tues, 1pm to 2pm

Location: Pick 407

Youngjae Pak

yjp9407@uchicago.edu

Section: Fri, 10:30am to 11:30am

Location: Green 108

Office hours: Fri, 11:30am to 12:30pm

Location: Pick 407

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. During one of the most divisive periods in American history, 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.

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.

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 regularly. Four sections are planned pending enrollment and classroom availability.

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.

Midterm (20%) and final (35%) exams. A midterm exam that covers the first half of the course will be administered in class on February 5. A final exam that covers all material in the course will be administered during exam week. The date and time

of the final will be set by the Registrar. Make-up exams will be permitted only for documented emergencies.

Decision memoranda: 25%. Students will examine two specific instances of presidential decision-making in detail during the course. These assignments aim to help students gain a deeper understanding of the political context in which presidents made historic decisions and the factors that bear on their decision making processes. Approximately two weeks before the due date, instructor will circulate writing prompts along with the materials necessary for answering them. Each essay will be 2-3 pages in length (single-spaced) and should be uploaded via Canvas as PDFs. The first is due by 5pm on January 30 and the second is due by 5pm on February 27.

Short reaction papers: 10%. Prior to each section meeting, students will write a short essay (no more than 500 words) in response to the prompt posted on Canvas. The goal of these assignments is to use and apply the material from the course to interpret presidential behavior and the office of the presidency. Responses should use the material provided in the prompt along with materials from the course, including readings, lectures, and class discussions, to engage the claims and questions raised by the prompt. Good responses may also post links to relevant outside sources. These essays should be uploaded as PDFs to Canvas.

Section participation: 10%. Students are expected to actively engage with the material in the course and their classmates. Sections will meet for one hour on a biweekly basis. 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 other occasional exercises.

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.

Policy on the Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools

This course is designed to help students develop their skills as thinkers and writers. The use of AI tools undermines these goals. As a result, students are only permitted to use AI tools, such as ChatGPT or Dall-E 2, on assignments in this course when

advance permission is given by the instructor. Unless given permission to use those tools, each student is expected to complete each course assignment without substantive assistance from others, including AI tools. If you are unclear if something is an AI tool, please check with your instructor. Unauthorized use of AI tools for any purposes in this course will violate the University's academic integrity policy. Such violations are grounds for receiving a failing grade on the assignment and will be referred to the relevant College authorities.

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.

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, Tiktoking, 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 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 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. [Any edition.] *American Government: Power and Purpose*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Milkis, Sidney M., and Michael Nelson. [Any edition.] *The American Presidency: Origins and Development*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

Course schedule

January 6. Colonial origins and the idea of a presidency.

- Baker, Peter. 2025. "Trump Takes America's 'Imperial Presidency' to a New Level." *New York Times*, December 21.
- Nelson, Eric. 2014. *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Introduction.
- Robertson, David Brian. 2013. *The Original Compromise: What the Constitution's Framers Were Really Thinking*. New York: Oxford University Press. Chapters 10 and 11.
- Constitution of the United States, Article II (<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript#toc-article-ii>).
- Hamilton, Alexander. 1788. *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 8. Historical development and institutional transformation (i).

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

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

January 13. Historical development and institutional transformation (ii).

Dearborn, John A. 2019. "The 'Proper Organs' for Presidential Representation: A Fresh Look at the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921." *Journal of Policy History* 31(1): 1–41.

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

January 15. Contemporary foundations of presidential power.

Mansfield, Harvey C. 1989. *Taming the Prince: The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power*. New York: Free Press. Chapter 1.

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

January 20. Presidential success with Congress (i).

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

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

January 22. Presidential success with Congress (ii).

- Cameron, Charles M., and Jee-Kwang Park. 2008. "A Primer on the President's Legislative Program." In *Presidential Leadership: The Vortex of Power*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jacobs, Nicholas F., and Sidney M. Milkis. 2021. "Get Out of the Way: Joe Biden, the U.S. Congress, and Executive-Centered Partisanship During the President's First Year in Office." *The Forum* 19(4): 709-744.
- Obama's Deal*. April 13, 2010. PBS Frontline film (56 minutes). Available at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/obamasdeal/>.

January 27. Veto politics.

- Cameron, Charles M. 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.
- Davis, Julia Hirschfeld. 2015. "In Wielding Rarely Used Veto, President Obama Puts Budget Heat on Republicans." *New York Times* October 22.
- Hamilton, Alexander. 1788. *The Federalist Papers*, #73 (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed73.asp).
- Hassell, Hans H. G., and Samuel Kernell. 2016. "Veto Rhetoric and Legislative Riders." *American Journal of Political Science* 60: 845-859.

January 29. Unilateral power.

- Howell, William G. 2003. *Power without Persuasion: The Politics of Direct Presidential Action*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapters 2-3, 5; skim chapters 1 and 4.
- Evert, Alex, Aaron Kaufman, and Jon C. Rogowski. 2025. "Presidential Supremacy and the Limitations of Separation of Powers." Typescript.
- 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 3. War and peace.

- Dallek, Robert. 2011. "Power and the Presidency, from Kennedy to Obama." *Smithsonian Magazine*.
- Healy, Gene, and John Glaser. 2018. "Repeal, Don't Replace, Trump's War Powers." *New York Times*, April 17.
- Howell, William G., and Jon C. Pevehouse. 2007. "When Congress Stops Wars." *Foreign Affairs* September/October: 95-107.
- Kriner, Douglas, and Francis Shen. 2014. "Responding to War on Capitol Hill: Battlefield Casualties, Congressional Response, and Public Support for the War in Iraq." *American Journal of Political Science* 58: 157-174.
- Zeisberg, Mariah. 2013. *War Powers: The Politics of Constitutional Authority*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapter 1.

February 5. **Midterm Exam.**

February 10. War, foreign policy, and presidential power.

- Howell, William G., 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; 4, 7.
- Wildavsky, Aaron. 1966. "The Two Presidencies." *Trans-Action* 4: 7-14.

February 12. Political control of the executive branch.

- Bryce, James. 1888. *American Commonwealth*. Chapter 9.
- Lewis, David E., 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.
- Libecap, Gary D. 2007. "The Federal Bureaucracy: From Patronage to Civil Service." In *Government and American Economy: A New History*.
- "Obama Office Alters More Federal Rules than Bush." November 28, 2011. Audio broadcast (6 minutes). Available at <https://www.npr.org/2011/11/28/142721675/obama-office-alters-more-federal-rules-than-bush>.
- Sarah Stillman. 2021. "The Race to Dismantle Trump's Immigration Policies." *The New Yorker*, February 8.

February 17. Judicial nominations.

- Epstein, Lee, Rene Lindstadt, Jeffrey A. Segal, and Chad Westerland. 2005. "The Changing Dynamics of Senate Voting on Supreme Court Nominees." *Journal of Politics*.
- Hamilton, Alexander. 1788. *The Federalist Papers*. #78 (http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed78.asp)
- Supreme Revenge: Battle for the Court*, PBS Frontline film (54 minutes). Available at pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/supreme-revenge/.

February 19. Law, judicial review, and the presidency.

- Bailey, Michael, 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.
- Brown, Rebecca L., and Lee Epstein. 2023. "Is the US Supreme Court a Reliable Backstop for an Overreaching US president? Maybe, But Is an Overreaching (partisan) Court Worse?" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 53: 234-255.
- Whittington, Keith E. 2001. "Presidential Challenges to Judicial Supremacy and the Politics of Constitutional Meaning." *Polity* 33: 365-395.

February 24. Presidents and the public.

- Cameron, Charles, and Jee-Kwang Park. 2009. "Going Public When Opinion Is Contested: Evidence from Presidents' Campaigns for Supreme Court Nominees, 1930-2009." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*.
- Canes-Wrone, Brandice, and Scott de Marchi. 2002. "Presidential Approval and Legislative Success." *Journal of Politics* 64: 491-509.
- Kernell, Samuel. 2006. *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*. Fourth edition. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press. Chapters 1 and 2.

February 26. Electoral incentives and presidential governance.

- Canes-Wrone, Brandice, Michael C. Herron and Kenneth W. Shotts. 2001. "Leadership and Pandering: A Theory of Executive Policymaking." *American Journal of Political Science* 45: 532-550.
- Gillion, Daniel Q. 2013. *The Political Power of Protest*. Chapter 4.
- Kriner, Douglas, and Andrew Reeves. 2015. "Presidential Particularism and Divide-the-Dollar Politics." *American Political Science Review* 109: 155-171.

March 3. Holding presidents accountable.

- Kriner, Douglas, and Eric Schickler. 2018. "The Resilience of Separation of Powers: Congress and the Russia Investigation." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*.
"Notes on the impeachment of Andrew Johnson." From Gillman, Graber, and Whittington, *American Constitutionalism*, Volume 1.
"How Nixon, Clinton, and Johnson Dealt with the Threat of Impeachment", video clip (12 minutes): <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/a-look-back-at-presidential-impeachment-in-u-s-history>.

March 5. Executive power and the constitutional order.

- Howell, William G., and Terry M. Moe. 2016. *Relic: How Our Constitution Undermines Effective Governance — And Why We Need a More Powerful Presidency*. Chapters 3 and 4.
Linz, Juan J. 1990. "The Perils of Presidentialism." *Journal of Democracy* 1: 51-69.