THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

Executive Power, Institutional Development, Leadership, and Representation

John Dearborn*
Political Science

“I can’t answer that question, because I don’t know what the President has authority to do. I am not a political scientist.”
- James S. Schramm

OVERVIEW

This course examines the American Presidency from four perspectives. First, it considers the creation of the presidency and “the executive power” in the Constitution. Second, it surveys the institutional development of the presidency and executive branch from the late 1700s through the present. Third, it examines different theories on the politics of presidential leadership. Finally, it asks whom the president represents and, having considered the institutional development of the presidency, whether the president needs more tools to fulfill expectations placed upon him or her.

More broadly, the lectures, discussions, primary source readings, and scholarly readings will help us achieve a few course goals. First, we will gain an improved ability to make sense of how the presidency works (or doesn’t work!) and how the office and institution have changed over time. Second, we will critically discuss arguments and theories offered by various authors. Third, we will frequently place the ideas from the readings into the context of current political events. Finally, as a more general goal for the course, I hope that we all can take a step forward toward becoming more politically critical, informed, and engaged citizens. Politics can be maddening, but it becomes more interesting and fun when you can make some sense of what is going on.

Our activities in class may take a number of formats. While we will often have lectures, depending on the topic there may also be discussions, debates, and/or small group work. Political concepts and topics often may reveal differences of opinion – this is particularly true around election years! So even as some of us may have strong views and potentially disagree, I ask that we listen to each other’s viewpoints while working to ensure that civility and respect for each other are always present in our conversations.

* In drafting this syllabus, I have partly drawn upon Stephen Skowronek’s syllabi for the graduate seminar “Executive Politics and the Presidency” (Fall 2015) and undergraduate course “Law, Leadership, and the American Presidency” (Fall 2016) at Yale.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Students are expected to complete the readings, come to lecture, and participate in class. There will be three short response paper topics offered, one for each of the first three units of the course. Students are expected to choose two of these to complete. The papers should be 5-7 pages double-spaced. Be sure to have a clear argument and use evidence to support your claims. In addition, there will be a final exam for the course. The grade breakdown is as follows:

- Participation – 15%
- 2 Response Papers – 50%
- Final Exam – 35%

COURSE OUTLINE

I. THE CONSTITUTION & EXECUTIVE POWER

Week 1: The Founding

David Brian Robertson, The Original Compromise: What the Constitution’s Framers Were Really Thinking (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), Ch. 9-10


Primary Sources:

The Constitution, Article I & II (1787)
Alexander Hamilton, The Federalist # 70 (March 15, 1788)

Week 2: Executive Power / Commander in Chief

Harvey Mansfield, Taming the Prince: The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power (New York: Free Press, 1989), Ch. 8, 10-11

Steven G. Calabresi and Christopher S. Yoo, The Unitary Executive: Presidential Power from Washington to Bush (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 3-36, 417-431

Louis Fisher, Defending Congress and the Constitution (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2011), Ch. 9

Primary Sources:

Pacificus – Helvidius debate (1793)
Abraham Lincoln, “Letter to Albert G. Hodges” (April 4, 1864)
Youngstown Sheet and Tube v. Sawyer (Jackson opinion) (1952)


**PAPER 1** – Did the Founders intend to create a strong or a weak presidency? What did it mean for the president to be granted “the executive power” and to be “Commander in Chief”?

**II. THE PRESIDENCY’S INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Week 3: Patrician Presidency**


Marc Landy and Sidney M. Milkis, *Presidential Greatness* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), Ch. 2-3


*Primary Source:*

Thomas Jefferson, “First Inaugural Address” (March 4, 1801)

**Week 4: Party Presidency**


David Donald, “A. Lincoln, Politician”


*The Simpsons*, “Mediocre Presidents”: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8N7BSsU5oo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8N7BSsU5oo)

*Primary Source:*

Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1885), Ch. 5
**Week 5: Modern Presidency**


Sidney M. Milkis, *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System Since the New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Ch. 3-6

Megan Ming Francis, *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern American State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Ch. 3

*Primary Sources:*
- Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), Ch. 3

**Week 6: Imperial Presidency**

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), Forward, Ch. 11


*Primary Source:*
- “Super President Theme Song!”: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ym6aoOIRnOc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ym6aoOIRnOc)

**Week 7: The Presidency in a Post-9/11 World**

Bruce Ackerman, *The Decline and Fall of the American Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), Ch. 1


*Primary Source:*
PAPER 2 – What aspects of the political development of the presidency do you think were positives? What aspects were negatives? Is there a particular period of time when you think the presidency had hit an ideal model?

III. PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP

Week 8: Persuasion and Skill


Week 9: Character Evaluation

James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, Ch. 1, 15


Alvin B. Tillery, Jr., and Hanes Walton, Jr., “Presidential greatness in the black press: ranking the modern presidents on civil rights policy and race relations, 1900–2016,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, forthcoming


Primary Source:


Week 10: Structural Advantages


**Week 11: Political Context**

Stephen Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), Ch. 2-3


**PAPER 3** – Consider presidential leadership from the perspective of skill, character, structural advantages, and political context. Briefly summarize how each might matter to presidents. Which do you think is most important for the president to be successful?

**IV. PRESIDENTIAL REPRESENTATION**

**Week 12: Representation and Performance**


Douglas L. Kriner and Andrew Reeves, *The Particularistic President: Executive Branch Politics and Political Inequality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Ch. 2, 7


**Week 13: Representation and Development**


Primary Sources:


FINAL EXAM

- Identifications – Choose 10 of 15 – 40%
- Short Essay – 20%
  - What is one thing about current political events today that this course has made you understand and how?
- Long Essay – 40%
  - Does the president represent all the people and does he or she generally do so better than Congress? Should the president be given more power to lead?