

GOVT 320.002 The Presidency

Wednesday 11:20AM-2:10PM

Kerwin Hall 104

Spring 2026

Instructor: David Miller

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- Office location: Kerwin Hall 219
- Office hours (reserve via Calendly):
 - Wednesday 10:00AM-11:00AM (in-person) or by appointment

Graduate Grading Assistant (meetings by appointment):

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Course Description

The American president is often thought of as the most powerful single individual in the United States and in the world—but, with that great power comes great responsibility. In this course, we will unpack what it means to be president, at once powerful but often powerless to solve the country and the world's problems alone and to satisfy the expectations of the public. We will begin by reviewing the historical origins of the modern presidency. Then, we will examine the key powers the president wields to advance their electoral, policy, and legacy goals, and how other actors can facilitate or inhibit their success. Finally, we will consider the extent to which presidents can be held to account and to be responsible to the preferences of the polity in the execution of their duties. This class will emphasize an institutional approach to the presidency—that is, focusing on the role of president and how that role conditions individuals' behavior rather than the idiosyncrasies of particular presidents—and draw on social scientific skills to contemplate how and why presidents behave as they do. The class will culminate with students producing briefing papers that inform future occupants of the Oval Office about the powers at their disposal and how best to employ them.

Learning Objectives

Students who complete this course successfully will be able to:

1. Acknowledge how the Founding and earlier periods of American history molded the modern institution of the presidency
2. Understand the powers presidents wield and how and why presidents utilize them
3. Appreciate how external actors (e.g., Congress, the courts, the public) inform and constrain presidents' behavior
4. Analyze, critique, and synthesize peer-reviewed academic articles about the American presidency

5. Produce a briefing paper that either advises future officeholders on one of the powers of the presidency

Required Texts, Materials, or Equipment

There is one required textbook for this class:

Howell, William G. 2023. *The American Presidency: An Institutional Approach to Executive Politics*. Princeton University Press.

The primary purpose of this textbook is to serve as a “primer” on each class period’s given topic, with the expectation that students will come to class familiar with the assigned chapter(s) and be prepared to be exposed to additional, more advanced content and/or engage in in-depth discussion.

In addition to this textbook, students will be expected to complete other assigned readings (e.g., journal articles). Most of these articles are hyperlinked to the American University Library below and can be accessed for free (AU login required). Other articles to which American University does not have access will be posted to the course Canvas page.

Assignments and Grading

Course grades will be determined by students’ performance on the following assignments and tasks:

- Briefing paper (50%): As a capstone to the class, students are asked to complete a briefing paper about one of the powers of the presidency. This assignment will be broken down into intermediate chunks that will be completed throughout the semester. More details will be distributed in class. Major deadlines related to the assignment are noted in the schedule at the end of the syllabus.
- Article outlines (20%): Five times during the semester, students must prepare and submit an outline of one of the research articles assigned for that week’s meetings. In preparing their outlines, students will be asked to: identify the research question; describe the theory the author develops to offer an answer to that question; state the authors’ hypotheses; describe the data and methods the author uses to test their hypotheses; report the authors’ results; and reflect on the internal and external validity of the study. More details on the format and expectations for these article summaries will be provided in class.
 1. **All students must complete one of their five outlines by January 28, and must have their remaining outlines completed by the end of the semester.**
 2. **Outlines are due before class on Wednesday on the week when the articles outlined will be discussed.**

3. Articles eligible for outlines are denoted in the reading list with a double asterisk ()**

- Discussion questions (10%): Every week **starting on January 28**, students are expected to submit a discussion question related to one of the week's readings, as well as a few sentences of preliminary thoughts concerning the answer (or about why they are asking the question if the answer is unclear). These discussion questions should focus on the reading's theoretical argument, research design, results, or substantive conclusions (e.g., is the measurement the author is using to operationalize a concept valid and/or reliable?). I will call on at least one student every class period to pose their discussion question to the class. More details on the format and expectations for discussion questions will be provided in class.

1. Discussion questions are due every Wednesday at 9:00AM and are to be submitted via the Canvas assignment designated for that week.

- Seminar participation (10%): This is a seminar-style class that depends on everyone's participation to motivate discussion. This means that all students are expected to come to class prepared to participate in class discussions about the week's readings. Students should read each article assigned for the week and come to class with questions and/or comments about things they found interesting, confusing, problematic, etc. about those articles.
- "What the heck are you up to, Mr. President?"¹ (5%): Once during the semester, each student will be asked to work with 1-2 other students to give a short 5-10 minute presentation about what President Donald Trump has been up to since the last class period. In doing so, groups can discuss events the president has attended, policy or staffing decisions that have emanated from the White House, public remarks the president or his immediate staff and appointees have made, or anything else related to the actions of the president. Students may prepare a short slide presentation, show the class web content, or use any other appropriate visuals. I will give a sample presentation during the second week of the semester that can serve as a template for future weeks.
- Simulation participation (5%): At the end of the semester, we will complete a simulation exercise in which you will be asked to play the role of a president negotiating with Congress about a piece of legislation. A good-faith attempt to complete all elements of the assignment will yield students full credit. More information about the simulation exercise will be posted as the end of the semester nears.

¹ This phrase originated as a headline used by The New York Post on July 5, 1979, in reference to President Jimmy Carter. At the time, the United States was experiencing serious economic and social turbulence and the president had cancelled a planned national address and sequestered himself at Camp David for a period of soul-searching. On July 15, Carter reemerged to deliver his "[crisis of confidence](#)" speech (also known as the "malaise speech") to the nation. While initially well-received, subsequent actions by Carter, such as asking for the resignations of all of his Cabinet members, created the perception of an administration in disarray.

- Extra credit (?): I reserve the right to provide opportunities for extra credit throughout the quarter. Extra credit opportunities may consist of finding current events examples of class concepts, offering responses to supplemental readings, and attending civic engagement events on campus or remotely. The value of each extra credit opportunity towards students' final grades will be provided in writing when each opportunity is announced (or shortly thereafter).

Final grades will be assigned according to the following cutoffs:

Score	Grade	Score	Grade	Score	Grade	Score	Grade
≥ 94	A	≥ 83	B	≥ 73	C	≥ 60	D
≥ 90	A-	≥ 80	B-	≥ 70	C-	< 60	F
≥ 87	B+	≥ 77	C+	≥ 65	D+		

The definitions of these letter grades are as follows:

- A: Excellent/outstanding: met or exceeded **the highest** expectations on all criteria for the assignment or course.
- A-: Excellent (somewhat): met **very high** expectations on all criteria, or **the highest** expectations on all but one or two criteria for the assignment or course.
- B+: Good (very): met **high** expectations on all but one or two criteria for the assignment or course.
- B: Good: met **standard** expectations all but one or two criteria for the assignment or course.
- B-: Good (somewhat)/fair: met **standard** expectations on most criteria (>50%) for the assignment or course while also falling short on one or two significant criteria or on a number of less important criteria.
- C+: Satisfactory (very): met **minimum** expectations on all criteria for the assignment or course.
- C: Satisfactory: met minimum expectations on most criteria (>50%) for the assignment or course while falling short in some ways. For undergraduates, a grade of C or above is required to receive major, minor, or certificate course credit.
- C-: Satisfactory (somewhat): fell short of meeting minimum expectations on most criteria (>50%) for the assignment or course. For undergraduates, a grade of C- is sufficient to receive elective course credit.
- D: Poor: fell short of meeting **minimum** expectations on most criteria for the assignment or course. For undergraduates, a grade of D or above is required to receive elective course credit.
- F: Academic failing; very poor performance.

Course Policies

- A link to the current version of the course syllabus will be posted on my website and on the course's Canvas page. Please refer to the most current version of the syllabus for information about the course schedule, course policies, etc.
- All other course readings will be made available through either the course syllabus, the AU Library, and/or the course Canvas page at least one week in advance of the class for which they are expected to be completed.
- We will often refer to contemporary political events both in lectures and class activities. In order to participate fully, I strongly encourage you to spend at least 10 minutes each day familiarizing yourself with recent news about American politics. You may consult the news source(s) of your choice; recommended sources (in no particular order) include the [AP](#), [The New York Times](#), [NPR](#), and the [BBC](#).
- All readings and assignments are due at the beginning of class on the day specified on the course syllabus and/or by the instructor in class. Late assignments will be accepted, but will be assessed a 10% penalty for each 24 hour period the assignment is late.
- *Communication Outside of Class*
 - I encourage you to contact me to discuss topics we are covering in class, concerns about the course, or other related issues outside of class. The primary mode of communication outside of class will be email. When you want to email me, please include the course code in the subject line. I will do my best to reply to emails within 24 hours, and I will *not* respond to emails about assignments sent less than 24 hours before they are due.
 - **NOTE:** If you have questions about grading, please include Evyn and I on the email.
 - Office hours scheduling will take place via Calendly. If you would like to come to office hours, please [visit my Calendly schedule](#) and reserve an available time for us to meet. If there are no available appointments or if you are not able to see me during office hours, please contact me so that we can find an alternative time to meet. As with emails, I will not discuss assignments during an office hours meeting that takes places less than 24 hours before they are due.
- *Technology*
 - Phone/laptop computer/tablet use is permitted only for the purposes of taking notes and retrieving materials/resources relevant to the course. Please be mindful that when you use your devices.
 - If any students would like to record lectures, please speak with me in advance to obtain permission. Unless prior authorization is obtained, students may not create and/or share audio or video recordings or photographs of any in-class activity.
- *Generative AI:* All work students submit should be their own. Students should generate their own ideas, words, and all elements of their work, unless appropriately acknowledged. Professors expect that students can discuss the contents of their work and the process of creating it. In some classes, the use of generative AI tools will be

appropriate. However, in this course, such tools are not permitted at any stage of your work because they interfere with our learning goals. Use of these tools may constitute a violation of the university's Academic Integrity Code.

Information and Resources for Students

- *Academic Integrity:* All students are required to follow the University's [Academic Integrity Code](#). If you have not already done so, please familiarize yourself with the standards and requirements of the University's Academic Code of Conduct. Violations of the Code of Conduct will not be tolerated and should be reported appropriately.
- *Student Code of Conduct:* The central commitment of American University is the development of thoughtful, responsible human beings in the context of a challenging yet supportive academic community. The [Student Code of Conduct](#) is designed to benefit the American University community and to assist in forming the highest standards of ethics and morals among its members. By registering for this course, students have acknowledged their awareness of the Student Code of Conduct and they are obliged to become familiar with their rights and responsibilities as defined by the Code.
- *Discrimination, Harassment, or Sexual Misconduct:* American University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, pregnancy or parenting, age, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, personal appearance, gender identity and expression, family responsibilities, political affiliation, source of income, veteran status, an individual's genetic information or any other bases under applicable federal and local laws. The University expressly prohibits any form of discriminatory harassment including sexual harassment, dating and domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, and stalking.

As a faculty member, I am required to report discrimination, harassment or sexual misconduct to the Office of Equity and Title IX if I witness it or become aware of it. There are four confidential resources on campus if you wish to speak to someone who is not required to report: Counseling Center, victim advocates in OASIS, medical providers in the Student Health Center, and the Chaplain in the Kay Spiritual Life Center. For more [information](#) or if you wish to [directly make a report](#), please visit the [Office of Equity and Title IX website](#).

- *Emergency Preparedness:* In an emergency, AU will implement a plan for meeting the needs of all members of the university community. Should the university be required to close for a period of time, we are committed to ensuring that all aspects of our educational programs will be delivered to our students. These may include altering and extending the duration of the traditional term schedule to complete essential instruction in the traditional format and/or use of distance instructional methods. Specific strategies will vary from class to class, depending on the format of the course and the timing of the emergency. Faculty will communicate class-specific information to students via AU e-mail or Canvas, while students must inform their faculty immediately of any absence due

to illness. Students are responsible for checking their AU e-mail regularly and keeping themselves informed of emergencies. In the event of a declared pandemic or other emergency, students should refer to the AU Web site (<http://www.american.edu/emergency/>) and the AU information line at 202-885-1100 for general university-wide information, as well as contact their faculty and/or respective dean's office for course and school/college-specific information.

- *Academic Support & Access Center*: The [Academic Support and Access Center](#) (ASAC) supports the academic development and educational goals of all American University students and is committed to providing access for individuals with disabilities within the university's diverse community. ASAC is located in Butler Pavilion 300 and can be reached at 202-885-3360 or asac@american.edu.

Disclaimer

I reserve the right to make modifications to this information throughout the semester. In the event of a conflict between syllabus versions, the most recent version will always supersede previous versions.

Preliminary Schedule of Topics, Readings, and Assignments²

January 14—Introductory Session and Social Science Practicum

- Howell Chapter 0
- [*Suggested Reading: Quantitative Research Methods for Political Science, Public Policy and Public Administration: 4th Edition with Applications in R by Hank Jenkins-Smith, Joseph Ripberger, Gary Copeland, Matthew Nowlin, Tyler Hughes, Aaron Fister, and Wesley Wehde, Chapters 1 and 2*](#)

January 21—Reading, Writing, and Researching; Constitutional Origins of the Presidency

- Howell Chapter 1
- [Federalist 69](#)
- [Binder, Sarah, Jackson Gode, Christian Potter, and Mark Spindel. 2024. "Tweeter-in-chief: Dynamics of Trump's populist campaign against the Fed." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 54\(4\): 541-550.](#)
- [Bump, Philip. "The president was never intended to be the most powerful part of government." *The Washington Post*, February 13, 2017.](#)
- [Howell, William and Terry M. Moe. 2023. "The Strongman Presidency and the Two Logics of Presidential Power." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 53\(2\): 145-168.](#)

January 28—The Modern Institutional Presidency/ Power and the Institutional Presidency

- Howell Chapter 3, 4 (skim 3, read 4)

² All readings and assignments are due at the beginning of class on the date specified.

- ****Beckmann, Matthew N. and Marek M. Kaminski. 2023. “Speaking, Thinking, and Being President.” *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy*, 4(2): 159-182.**
ON CANVAS
- ****Lowande, Kenneth and Nicholas Birdsong. n.d. “Presidential Capacity.”**
- **BRIEFING PAPER TOPIC DUE BEFORE CLASS ON CANVAS**

February 4—Relations with Congress

- Howell Chapter 8
- ****Beckmann, Matthew N. 2008. “The President’s Playbook: White House Strategies for Lobbying Congress.” *Journal of Politics*, 70(2): 407-419.**
- ****Guenther, Scott M. and Samuel Kernell. 2021. “Veto Threat Bargaining with a Bicameral Congress.” *Political Research Quarterly*, 74(3):628-644.**

February 11—Unilateral Powers

- Howell Chapter 9
- ****Kaufman, Aaron R. and Jon C. Rogowski. 2024. “Divided Government, Strategic Substitution, and Presidential Unilateralism.” *American Journal of Political Science*, 68(2): 816-831.**
- ****Lowande, Kenneth and Michael Poznansky. 2024. “Executive Action That Lasts.” *Journal of Public Policy* 44(2): 344-365.**
- **BRIEFING PAPER ARTICLE OUTLINES DUE (FIRST PAIR)**

February 18—Control of the Bureaucracy--Staffing

- Howell Chapter 10
- ****Hollibaugh Jr, Gary E., and Lawrence S. Rothenberg. 2024. “Agency Control through the Appointed Hierarchy: Presidential Politicization of Unilateral Appointees.” *Journal of Public Policy* 44(1): 44-66.**
- ****Krause, George A., and Anne Joseph O’Connell. 2019. “Loyalty–Competence Trade-Offs for Top US Federal Bureaucratic Leaders in the Administrative Presidency Era.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 49(3): 527-550.**

February 25—Control of the Bureaucracy--Management

- Howell Chapter 10
- ****Bednar, Nicholas R. and David E. Lewis. 2024. “Presidential Investment in the Administrative State.” *American Political Science Review*, 118(1): 442-457.**
- ****Kennedy, Joshua B., and Andrew Rudalevige. 2025. “Implementing Executive Orders in the Administrative State.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 55(2): 72-86.**

March 4—Relations with the Federal Judiciary

- Howell Chapter 11

- [Cameron, Charles M. and Jonathan P. Kastellec. 2016. "Are Supreme Court Nominations a Move-the-Median Game?" *American Political Science Review*, 110\(4\): 778-797.](#)
- [**Thrower, Sharece. 2017. "The President, the Court, and Policy Implementation." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 47\(1\): 122-145.](#)
- **BRIEFING PAPER ARTICLE OUTLINES DUE (SECOND PAIR)**

March 11—SPRING BREAK, NO CLASS

March 18— Relations with the Media/Public Opinion

- Howell Chapter 12, 13 (read 12, skim 13)
- [**Clifford, Scott, D.J. Flynn, Brendan Nyhan, and Kasey Rhee. 2023. "Decider in Chief? Why and How the Public Exaggerates the Power of the Presidency." *Political Research Quarterly*, 77\(2\): 469-484.](#)
- [**Franco, Annie, Justin Grimmer, and Chloe Lim. n.d. "The Limited Effect of Presidential Public Appeals."](#)

March 25—Relations with Interest Groups

- [**Box-Steffensmeier, Janet M., Dino P. Christenson, Lauren Ratliff Santoro, and Elizabeth Ann Steffensmeier. Forthcoming. "Cutting in Line: How Powerful Interests Hasten & Delay Executive Branch Nominations." *Journal of Politics*.](#)
- [**Miller, David Ryan. 2023. "The President Will See Whom Now? Presidential Engagement with Organized Interests" *American Political Science Review*, 177\(3\): 1019-1035.](#)
- **BRIEFING PAPER ARTICLE OUTLINES DUE (THIRD PAIR)**

April 1—Presidential Representation

- [**Griffin, John, and Brian Newman. 2016. "The Presidency and Political Equality." *Congress & the Presidency*, 43\(3\): 352-376.](#)
- [**Kriner, Douglas L., and Andrew Reeves. 2015. "Presidential Particularism and Divide-the-Dollar Politics." *American Political Science Review* 109\(1\): 155-171.](#)

April 8—Presidential Accountability

- [**Kriner, Douglas L. and Eric Schickler. 2014. "Investigating the President: Committee Probes and Presidential Approval, 1953-2006." *Journal of Politics* 76\(2\): 521-534.](#)
- [**Lowande, Kenneth and Ben Goehring. 2025. "Public Responses to Unilateral Policymaking." *Journal of Experimental Politics*, 12\(1\): 86-98.](#)
- [**Reeves, Andrew R, and Jon C. Rogowski. 2016. "Unilateral Powers, Public Opinion, and the Presidency." *Journal of Politics*, 78\(1\): 137-151.](#)

April 15—SIMULATION (REMOTE)

- **BRIEFING PAPER DRAFT DUE (OPTIONAL)**

April 22—SIMULATION DEBRIEF (REMOTE)

May 6—(FINAL EXAM DAY)

- Final papers due by 11:59PM ET