

POLS 4815
Presidential Power: Lessons from History
Fall 2025

Instructor

Dr. Michael S. Lynch
Office: Baldwin Hall 416
Email: mlynch@uga.edu
Office Hours: Tuesdays 1:30PM - 3PM and by appointment

Class Schedule

Tuesdays and Thursdays
9:35AM-10:50AM
Baldwin Hall 301

Course Description

This course explores the evolving powers of the U.S. presidency through the lens of American history. Through case studies, primary sources, and scholarly debates, we will explore the following:

- the origins of executive power in the Constitution and Federalist Papers
- competing academic theories of presidential power
- presidents' power to influence policy and the limits of that power
- presidents' historical war powers and use of those power today.

The course will place a special emphasis on primary documents, with students receiving an introduction to archival research in conjunction with archivists from the Russell Special Collections Library. By the end of the course, students will be equipped to critically assess the balance of power in American government and understand how historical context informs contemporary debates about presidential leadership.

Course Materials

The following book is required for the class. This book has been reprinted many times – any edition will work fine for class.

Kennedy, Robert F. 1968. *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*.

All other readings for the course will be provided by me via eLC or will be accessible for no cost on the internet.

We will be working to take the lessons of history and apply them to contemporary politics. As such, I recommend keeping up with political news during the semester. The [New York Times](#) and the [Wall Street Journal](#) are two excellent news sources. University of Georgia students have full digital access to both of these papers through the UGA Libraries (see this [website](#) for details).

Course Grading

Your grade in this class will be assigned according to the following:

1. **Class attendance and participation** (10% of final grade): Students are expected to be familiar with assigned readings and should be prepared to intelligently discuss and debate issues from the readings during class. As such, class attendance and participation will be vital to your success in this class. To be awarded full participation points you must attend class, read any assigned materials, and actively engage the class in discussion. Any student that misses more than half of class meetings will receive an F for the semester.
2. **Written Assignments** (45% of final grade): Two written assignments will be due during the term. These assignments are designed to encourage students to engage with the course readings. Each of the two assignments is worth 22.5% of your grade.
 - *Paper 1 – Decision Points Essay*: Using the Russell Library Archives and additional readings, we will conduct a detailed examination of Kennedy's decision to act during the Cuban Missile Crisis. What information did Kennedy have? What were alternative decisions he could have made? What are the possible outcomes of each of these alternative decisions? What did Kennedy end up doing and why? Using this episode as an example, students will choose a time a president had a key historical decision to make and will assess these points in an essay. The claims of the essay will be supported by references, including primary resources. There is a 10-page maximum for this assignment.
 - *Paper 2 – Campaign Promise Essay*: Students will write a paper examining a campaign promise made by President Trump or Biden. Using primary resources, students will research what attempts the president made to implement this promise and whether or not these attempts were successful. Students will critically assess which tools and/or formal powers could be used to implement this policy. Students will also assess which political actors and/or institutions may stand in the way of a president making good on their campaign promise. There is a 10-page maximum for this assignment.

Assignments turned in late will be penalized one letter grade for each day they are late. After one week, late assignments will no longer be accepted.
3. **Midterm Exam** (22.5% of final grade): Please take note of this date and mark it on your calendar now.
4. **Final Exam** (22.5% of final grade): Please take note of the date for the final exam and mark it on your calendar now.

Missed exams will only be excused for a documented illness (documentation must be provided by a physician) or a death in the family. If you are excused from an exam, I reserve the right to alter the format and substance of the makeup exam (e.g. you may not get the same exam as everyone else).

Course grades will be assigned as follows: 93–100% = A, 90–93% = A-, 87–90% = B+, 83–87% = B, 80–83% = B-, 77–80% = C+, 73–77% = C, 70–73% = C-, 60–70% = D, 0–60% = F.

Other Issues (in no particular order)

1. **Disabilities:** Students with disabilities of any kind are strongly encouraged to tell me at the beginning of the semester, so appropriate accommodations can be made. If you plan to request accommodations for a disability, please register with the Disability Resource Center. They can be reached by visiting Clark Howell Hall, calling 706-542-8719 or by visiting <http://accessibility.uga.edu>.
2. **Instructor Availability:** I am available to meet with students by appointment if anyone cannot attend my posted office hours. Please email me to schedule a meeting.
3. **Classroom Behavior:** Students should behave professionally throughout the course. Disruptive behavior in discussion sections will not be tolerated. Laptops and other electronic may be used to take notes in class, but not in a way that is disruptive to other students.

UGA is committed to creating a dynamic, diverse, and welcoming learning environment for all students and has a [non-discrimination policy](#) that reflects this philosophy. Our class will respect all students regardless of race, color, sex (including sexual harassment and pregnancy), sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity or national origin, religion, age, genetic information, disability, or veteran status.

4. **Cheating and Plagiarism:** All course work must meet the standards put forth in the University of Georgia's [Student Honor Code](#). See the [Academic Honesty Policy](#) for details on what is expected of you.
5. **FERPA Notice:** The Federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) grants students certain information privacy rights. See the registrar's explanation at <https://reg.uga.edu/general-information/ferpa/>.
6. **Well-being Resources:** UGA Well-being Resources promote student success by cultivating a culture that supports a more active, healthy, and engaged student community. Anyone needing assistance is encouraged to contact Student Care & Outreach (SCO) in the Division of Student Affairs at 706-542-8479 or visit <https://sco.uga.edu>. Student Care & Outreach helps students navigate difficult circumstances by connecting them with the most appropriate resources or services. They also administer the Embark@UGA program which supports students experiencing, or who have experienced, homelessness, foster care, or housing insecurity.

UGA provides both clinical and non-clinical options to support student well-being and mental health, any time, any place. Whether on campus, or studying from home or abroad, UGA Well-being Resources are here to help.

- Well-being Resources: <https://well-being.uga.edu>
- Student Care and Outreach: <https://sco.uga.edu>
- University Health Center: <https://healthcenter.uga.edu>
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services: <https://caps.uga.edu> or CAPS 24/7 crisis support at 706-542-2273.
- Health Promotion/ Fontaine Center: <https://healthpromotion.uga.edu>
- Disability Resource Center and Testing Services: <https://accessibility.uga.edu>

Additional information, including free digital well-being resources, can be accessed through the UGA app or by visiting <https://well-being.uga.edu>.

7. **Artificial Intelligence-Based Software:** Students are allowed to use generative AI software for academic work, provided they document its use. This includes specifying the software used, the extent of its use, and how it contributed to the final product. AI-generated content must be cited appropriately, and students should include a brief reflection on how the AI tool helped them and what they learned from using it. The work must remain original, with AI not replacing critical thinking or personal effort. Instructors will evaluate both the content and the documentation of AI use, considering proper documentation in grading. Failure to document AI use may result in penalties, including reduced grades or academic disciplinary actions. Cases of suspected misuse will be reviewed by the academic integrity committee. (This paragraph was generated with the assistance of Microsoft Copilot).

Tentative Schedule

Introduction

August 14

Introduction and Course Overview

Klein, Ezra. 2014. “The Green Lantern Theory of the Presidency, Explained.”

[The Trump-o-meter](#). *Politifact*.

[Biden Promise Tracker](#). *Politifact*.

August 19, 21 and 26

Constitutional Origins and Expectations

[U.S. Constitution](#)

Federalist Papers [No. 69](#) and [No. 70](#)

Wehle, Kim. 2019. *How to Read the Constitution and Why*. Chapter 3.

Howell, William G. 2023. *The American Presidency: An Institutional Approach to Executive Politics*. Chapter 2.

Decision Points

August 28

Decision Points, Iraq War

Bush, George W. 2010. *Decision Points*. Chapter 8.

September 2

Decision Points, Cuban Missile Crisis

Introduction to Archival Research and Presidential Records, Movie Day

(Russell Special Collections Library, Room 271)

September 4 and 9

Decision Points, Cuban Missile Crisis

Introduction to Archival Research and Presidential Records, Archives Visit

(Russell Special Collections Library, Room 329)

September 11 and 16

Decision Points, Cuban Missile Crisis

Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy. 1968. *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*.

Brams, Steven J. 1985. *Superpower Games: Applying Game Theory to Superpower Conflicts*. Chapters 1.1-1.2 and 2.1-2.5.

September 18

Decision Points, Recent Applications

Readings on Iran Nuclear Program and Ukraine War, TBA

Theories of Presidential Power

September 23

Power to Persuade

Neustadt, Richard E. 1960. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*. Chapter 3.

September 25 and 30

Unilateral Power

Moe, Terry M, and William G. Howell. 1999. "Unilateral Action and Presidential Power: A Theory." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*.

Black et al. 2011. "Assessing Congressional Responses To Growing Presidential Powers: The Case of Recess Appointments." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*.

[National Labor Relations Board v. Noel Canning](#)

October 2

Power under Polarization

Lowande, Kenneth. 2024. *False Front: The Failed Promise of Presidential Power in a Polarized Age*. Chapter 2.

Assignment #1 Due

October 7

Midterm Exam

Presidential Policymaking

October 9 and 14

Presidents and Lawmaking

Moe, Terry M, and William G. Howell. 1999. "Unilateral Action and Presidential Power: A Theory." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*.

Center for Legislative Archives, National Archives and Records Administration. 2020. [The Presidential Veto and Congressional Veto Override Process](#).

Gorman, Tori. Congressional Research Service. 2025. [The Reconciliation Process: Frequently Asked Questions](#).

[Voteview.com](#)

[H.R. 1 – One Big Beautiful Bill](#).

[H.R.5376 – Inflation Reduction Act](#).

October 16 and 21

Unilateral Powers

[Trump Presidential Actions](#).

Grabher, Abigail A. Congressional Research Service. 2021. [Executive Orders: An Introduction](#)

October 23, 28 and 30

Bureaucratic Policymaking

Ritchie, Melinda. 2025. "Congress and the Bureaucracy: Back-Channel Policy Making." In *Congress Reconsidered*, 13th ed.

Brookings Institute. 2025. [Tracking Regulatory Changes in the Second Trump Administration](#).

[West Virginia v. EPA](#)

Engstrom, David Freeman and John E. Priddy. 2022. [West Virginia v. EPA and the Future of the Administrative State](#).

November 4

Presidential Policymaking, Recent Application

Coleman, Sarah. R. 2018. "A Promise Unfulfilled, An Imperfect Legacy: Obama and Immigration Policy." In *The Presidency of Barack Obama: A First Historical Assessment*.

War Powers

November 6

Introduction

Howell, William G. 2023. *The American Presidency: An Institutional Approach to Executive Politics*. Chapter 16.

November 11, 13 and 18

War Powers Resolution and AUMFs

Introduction to Congressional Records Research

Fisher and Adler. 1998. ["War Powers Resolution: Time to Say Goodbye."](#)

[War Powers Resolution Reporting Project](#).

[US Forces Abroad](#).

November 20 and 25

War Powers, Recent Application

Edelson, Chris. 2013. *Emergency Presidential Power*. Chapter 9. "Emergency Power at Its Zenith: The Bush Administration and the Unitary Executive."

[Cheney's Law](#)

December 2

Recent Application Continued, Review

[Bush Administration Terror Memos](#)

Assignment #2 Due

December 9 (8:00AM to 11:00AM)

Final Exam