

Module Overview: Presidential Roles, Power, and the Modern Presidency



Franklin Delano Roosevelt giving a radio speech, 1939

This first module explores the evolution of the presidency from its origins to what is generally referred to as the "modern presidency." This is a crucial starting point for our class, exploring how the presidency fits into the overall US political system and how it has evolved over time.

The emergence of the modern presidency is traced to Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) in the 1930s and 1940s, when the Great Depression and World War Two created crisis conditions leading to stronger executive action. There were, of course, important precursors to FDR, including Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson in the early 20th Century. We could also make connections further back to Lincoln during the Civil War and even to earlier presidents such as Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson.

Despite these earlier examples of substantial presidential action, the general view is that the office was permanently transformed from FDR onward, so that all presidents since that time have shared the distinctive experience of a more powerful office with expanded resources and expectations compared to the 'traditional' presidency.

Our aims in this first module accordingly include the following:

- a) To think about how this modern presidency emerged;
- b) To think about what defines the modern presidency compared to the earlier presidency;
- c) To think about how modern presidents since the 1930s (up to the present) have tried to govern in relation to their expanded resources and expectations; and finally
- d) To explore scholarly debates about whether this modern presidency has become too powerful. This is sometimes referred to as the "imperial presidency."

Here I want to give you a little background and introduce the readings for the week.

From the Constitutional Origins to the Modern Presidency

To explore these topics, we can begin by making sure we are clear on the underlying constitutional design of the US government. In particular, we need to note the way the Constitution sets out some formal powers for the presidency and also links the president and executive branch to the rest of the federal government. From that starting point, it is easier to understand how the modern presidency remains connected to this constitutional context while also evolving from those foundations.

Chapter 1 and Appendix C from The Politics of the Presidency (assigned for the first two days of class but essentially part of this module) provide some key points. First, as indicated in Appendix C, the Constitution spells out some specific powers for the president (see Article II, Section 2 and 3):

- Commander in Chief of the military,
- power to make treaties with other countries (with Senate approval),
- power to appoint various federal government officials (ambassadors, department heads, judges to the federal courts, again often requiring Senate approval),
- power to send and receive ambassadors,
- power to pardon,
- and a power/requirement to report to Congress on the state of the union (on how things are going) and make policy recommendations (what we call the State of the Union Address).

Article II, Section 1 is also important here. It begins by placing the president at the head of the executive branch, stating that the "executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States."

Finally, Article I of the Constitution, on the legislative branch, is also relevant, since in Section 7 it establishes the veto power. Every bill passed by both chambers of Congress has to go to the president before it becomes a law. The president can then decide to veto (reject) the bill, sending it back to Congress. And Congress can only override the veto with a two thirds vote in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

These formal powers signal significant roles played by the president in the complex US system of government: a leader in foreign policy (military leader, chief diplomat), the chief administrator (head of the branch that implements the law), and finally, an important legislative role through the State of the Union Address and the veto power.

As Chapter 1 of Politics of the Presidency explains, this leaves open a lot of uncertainty about how these powers will work in practice. For instance, how much will presidents decide to make use of the veto? Or, perhaps most significantly, how will presidents understand the vague and potentially broad meaning of having the "executive power" vested in the presidency?

The formal design also shows just how much the president and executive branch operate in a system of "checks and balances" or shared and separated powers. For instance, the president oversees the executive branch, but his or her appointments to head the departments of that branch (for instance, the Department of Commerce or the Department of Education) require Senate approval. The president is Commander in Chief, but Congress has the power to declare war. The president appoints judges and justices, but then these appointments are for life, giving the federal court system some independence from the president. And Congress passes laws, but the president gets to shape that process by recommending policies (State of the Union) and potentially blocking bills (the veto) he or she does not like.

From these starting points, there was a general expectation that a lot of governmental power would reside with Congress. It is true that the presidency ended up with more power than in some of the proposals put forward at the Constitutional Convention (see Table 1-1, p. 13). But in the 19th Century the presidency was often relatively weak, sometimes seen mostly as a 'clerk' administering government while the center of politics lay elsewhere. At the same time, the vagueness of the "vesting clause" giving the president executive power left a lot of room for presidents to assert a stronger role in addressing what they saw/depicted as the needs of the "people" or nation (see p. 11-15 on different presidential philosophies).

This constitutional foundation remains key to understanding the presidency. All presidents still operate within this framework, even if they seek to redefine its meaning in pursuit of their goals. All presidents also have to face the complexity of interacting with the other branches of the federal government and with state governments. Even though it is easy to think of the president as defining the political process ("the Reagan years" or "the Obama years"), the reality is much more complicated.

Our aim here is to make sure we are familiar with these foundations and then to understand how the modern presidency developed out of this context.

Here are some points to consider as you do the reading and related assignments for this week:

Exploring the Modern Presidency

July 26 - July 27

A. Looking at Chapter 1 of Politics of the Presidency. (see especially p. 22-33) and at the Introduction and Chapter 1 of Grover, what happened to produce the modern presidency? How would you define this modern presidency?

Please note, when you read the Grover chapter, he is not giving you his own view of the presidency. He is instead summarizing major perspectives from other leading scholars (that he will partly critique in later chapters). Grover talks about a lot of authors -- but you should focus on his discussion of the following four scholars: Harold Laski, Clinton Rossiter, Richard Neustadt, and Arthur Schlesinger.

The first half of the week focuses on the emergence of the modern presidency and on some scholars who saw this as a necessary (desirable) development (Laski, Rossiter, Neustadt). Please consider the following questions:

1. What does Laski (as discussed by Grover) see as the obstacles that limited a strong presidency before the 1930s? What changed in the 1930s and 1940s?
2. What new roles and powers emerged for the modern presidency from FDR onward? What is Rossiter's approach to understanding this modern presidency? Why do both he and Laski see this as a positive development?

B. Bringing in Neustadt (See Grover, Chapter 1, plus the assigned short piece by Neustadt himself)

We can add to this by considering the perspective of Richard Neustadt (a major figure in presidency scholarship). Like Laski and Rossiter, Neustadt believed in the value of an effective modern presidency. But his view of the presidency complicates our understanding of how modern presidents are able to act.

3. What does Neustadt see as the nature of presidential power? If a modern presidency is going to be effective in handling the evolving roles of the office, what is required to be successful?
4. How does Neustadt possibly challenge or go beyond the ideas put forward by Rossiter and Laski?

July 28-July 29

C. For the second half of the week, we turn to another perspective on the modern presidency. This approach shares the view that the modern presidency has become more powerful and more central to American politics. But it raises the concern that the presidency is now too powerful in relation to the other branches.

A key version of this perspective is Arthur Schlesinger's idea of the "imperial presidency." He sees this as something that fully emerged with Lyndon Johnson and especially Richard Nixon (in the late 1960s and early 1970s) during the Vietnam War. Of course, the imperial presidency also had earlier roots, including FDR and then the context of the Cold War in the 1950s and early 1960s. In addition, Schlesinger argues that the period since 9/11 has given further life to the imperial presidency. In thinking about this view of the presidency, please focus on the following:

1. Looking at the text by Schlesinger and at Grover's discussion of Schlesinger, what is the imperial presidency and how does Schlesinger think it emerged?
2. If the imperial presidency is partly about power in foreign policy and national security, how does it also extend to domestic policy and politics?
3. How does Schlesinger's view potentially challenge the Neustadt perspective of the presidency? Do you find one perspective more convincing than the other?

D. To think about the power of the modern presidency and Schlesinger's views, we can also look in more detail at the actual functioning of the modern executive branch, focusing mostly on domestic policy but also taking a look at use of military force (on war powers, see the short assigned section of Pika et al. Chapter 10). Schlesinger is concerned about the executive branch having a lot of unilateral power (ability to act without the other branches). So based on Chapter 6 of Politics of the Presidency, please consider:

4. How could a president use executive orders and other resources in the executive branch to shape policy results without Congress? (Here you might note the example involving President Reagan at the end of the chapter, on p. 328-329.)
5. Are there limits to the president's ability to control the executive branch and use it to shape government outcomes? What specific limits seem most significant to you? Does this potentially challenge Schlesinger's idea of an imperial presidency?

Please also read p. 510-520 only of Chapter 10 in Politics of the Presidency:

6. Based on this discussion of the use of military force, how effective has Congress been (or not) in limiting presidential dominance over national security policy in the modern period? What do you think explains this outcome?

Concluding Note

Based on all of this material, you should now have some idea of the general rise of the modern presidency, and also of some complicated debates over: a) how this modern presidency really works, b) how powerful (or not) this presidency is, and c) the possible value or danger associated with this modern presidency.

This week there are two graded discussions (due Tuesday and Thursday). There is also a short paper assignment that will be posted on July 27 and due next week, on August 2.

To read:**July 27-28**

(Also refer back to Politics of the Presidency Chapter 1 and Appendix C, assigned for July 22-23)

[GroverIntroduction.pdf](https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/files/79389332/download?wrap=1) (https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/files/79389332/download?wrap=1)

[GroverChapter1.pdf](https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/files/79389329/download?wrap=1) (https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/files/79389329/download?wrap=1)

[Richard_NeustadtPresPower.pdf](https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/files/79389334/download?wrap=1) (https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/files/79389334/download?wrap=1)

July 29-30

[SchlesingerImperialPresidencyRedux.pdf](https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/files/79389333/download?wrap=1)

(https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/files/79389333/download?wrap=1)

[Pika et al Politics of the Presidency Chapter 6 Executive Politics.pdf](https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/files/79389335/download?wrap=1)

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Page 510-520 only from:

[Pika et al Politics of the Presidency Chapter 10 National Security.pdf](https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/files/79389336/download?wrap=1)

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To complete/submit:

[Discussion 1: The Modern Presidency](https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/discussion_topics/6482510)

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[Discussion 2: The Modern Presidency Becomes An Imperial Presidency?](https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/1467458/discussion_topics/6482509)

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Paper Assignment that I will post on July 27, due August 2