

# It's About Power but Also Norms: A Pedagogical Approach to Teaching About the American Presidency

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**ABSTRACT** Introductory undergraduate courses in American politics often center the Constitution and focus on fundamental principles, structures, and processes. Unfortunately, this focus allows less space to discuss the role that norms play in supporting formal rules and institutions in the American political system. As a political science professor teaching an introductory course on American politics in 2019 and 2020, I became acutely aware of the limitations of this course design. This context showcased the ways in which many of these norms are taken for granted by many, including American politics scholars. Moreover, it sparked conversations among my colleagues about whether we should adapt to the moment and update our instruction to place greater emphasis on norms to contextualize the present political moment for our students. My answer was yes. However, doing so requires instructors to be attentive to issues of objectivity, authority, and partisanship. This article shares strategies that I plan to implement when I teach this course again. In particular, I discuss three guiding pedagogical principles when teaching about presidential norms. I then provide discussion questions that instructors can use to spark conversations about the relationship between adherence to presidential norms and the stability of American political institutions.

From the earliest days of Donald Trump's surprising path to the office of the presidency, he showcased his willingness to buck norms and traditions of the office. For instance, during the Republican primary, Trump encouraged his supporters to "rough up" people they disagreed with—even joking that he would pay the legal fees if they did so (Tiedfenthaler 2016). Then, as the Republican nominee, he led crowds in the chant "Lock Her Up!," referring to his opponent in the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton (Samuels 2020). This chant referenced the scandal surrounding Clinton's use of a private email server in her New York home to review both personal and work emails during her tenure as Secretary of State in the Obama administration (Bradner 2016).

Trump also violated several norms regarding transparency in his personal finances. First, he never released his tax returns—a

norm that began as a result of the Watergate scandal during the Nixon administration (Stein 2019). These records became public only after the *New York Times* obtained his returns and released a bombshell report (Blackall 2020). Second, he refused to place his businesses and investments in a blind trust to mitigate concerns about potential conflicts of interest while serving as president. Instead, he turned his businesses over to his sons, Eric and Donald Trump Jr. (Alexander, Peterson-Withorn, and Wang 2017).

Third, as president, Trump continued to sidestep norms of the office. In 2017, he admitted that he fired FBI Director James Comey because of his involvement in the probe of Russian meddling into the 2016 election (Prokop 2017). He also fired several cabinet members that he perceived to be disloyal to him because they opposed his policy positions—including several via the social media platform, Twitter (Macias 2020; McEvoy 2020; Slack 2019). Fourth, he refused to concede the race after several news outlets officially called the 2020 presidential election for his opponent, Democratic nominee Joe Biden. Instead, he logged onto

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his Twitter account and sent a flurry of tweets claiming that there was widespread voter fraud and that the election was rigged (Freking 2020).

As political scientists who teach the undergraduate introductory course on American politics, we often center the Constitution and focus on fundamental principles, structures, and processes.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, focusing on institutional rules and design allows less space on the course syllabus to discuss the role of norms in supporting formal rules and institutions in the American political system. As a political science professor teaching an introductory course on American politics in 2019 and 2020, I became acutely aware of the limitations of this course design. This context showcased the ways in which many of these norms are taken for granted by many, including American politics scholars. It also sparked many conversations among my colleagues about whether we should adapt to the moment and update our instruction to place greater emphasis on norms to contextualize the present political moment for our students. My answer was yes. However, doing so requires instructors to be attentive to issues of objectivity, authority, and partisanship.

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This article describes strategies that I developed and insights that I plan to implement when I teach this course again. I begin by discussing the importance of teaching presidential norms and the challenges that can arise when doing so. Next, I identify and discuss three guiding pedagogical principles when teaching about presidential norms. As part of this discussion, I include concrete techniques for teaching students about presidential powers in ways that incorporate not only formal and implied powers but also norms of the office. I also provide discussion questions that instructors can use to spark critical conversations about the relationship between adherence to presidential norms and the stability of American political institutions.

#### **IN DEFENSE OF INCORPORATING INSTRUCTION ON PRESIDENTIAL NORMS**

Azari and Smith (2012, 38) argued that scholars who study and teach about established democracies tend to focus on “constitutions, statutes, and other formal rules” while giving insufficient attention to “the unwritten rules of the political process” that “stabiliz[e] and legitimat[e] democratic contestation.” As a result, these scholars often are unable to offer a compelling explanation of the breakdowns in orderly governance when they occur. The political climate between 2016 and 2020 shone new light on how informal rules and norms and expectations support the country’s formal rules and institutions, thereby ensuring a stable yet adaptable democratic political system—a relationship that many, including American politics faculty, previously took for granted.

This was my experience when teaching introductory American politics courses in fall 2019 and spring 2020. For example, my students came to class with countless questions about critical media coverage of President Trump following the 2020 State of the Union Address. They wondered about the political

significance of headlines focusing on President Trump and Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, not shaking hands at the beginning of his speech (Martin 2020). They also asked questions about the Speaker deviating from the customary way of introducing the president: “Members of Congress, I have the high privilege and distinct honor of presenting to you the President of the United States.” Instead, headlines explained, she introduced him without the typical flourish: “Ladies and gentleman, the President of the United States” (Law 2020).

In a previous class session, students had read how the Constitution describes the State of the Union, so they understood that the framers explicitly stated that the president “shall from time to time give to Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.” During this class session, we discussed how the delivery of this annual address has changed over time (History, Art & Archives, US House of Representatives n.d.). However, in the context of ongoing events, my students struggled to think critically about how the breakdown in interpersonal relationships among leaders in the two branches can

destabilize the governing process and potentially threaten the vitality of democratic institutions. Instead, they vaguely referenced features of the Constitution such as checks and balances and separation of powers as we discussed remedies to solve interbranch conflicts.

For some scholars, the call to adhere to neatly articulated pedagogical principles when teaching about the potential breakdown of democratic institutions may seem counterintuitive. As political scientists living through this moment, many instructors likely felt a sense of urgency in conveying the significance—and potential threat—posed by many of the moments being broadcast by news outlets. Despite this inclination, our teaching must still adapt to the everyday realities of teaching and learning. As leaders in the classroom, we must navigate criticism that we lack objectivity in our classroom instruction and that we teach with liberal bias (Gross 2016; Rom 2020). Additionally, we must anticipate how the diverse backgrounds of our students—especially their partisan identities—may make them resistant to instruction that disrupts their prior beliefs (Kahne and Bowyer 2017; Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2008). Finally, we must consider how our individual positionality may make us more likely to encounter challenges to our authority when teaching controversial topics (Huston 2006; Pittman 2010; Reid 2010; Smith and Hawkins 2011).

Unfortunately, all of this must be achieved in the context of heightened politicization of the college curriculum (Brown 2018; Fingerhut 2017a; 2017b; Shapiro 2010), which amplifies the long-standing challenge of overcoming partisan-motivated reasoning in the teaching and learning process (Hodgin and Kahne 2018; Kahne and Bowyer 2017) and can affect how students perceive and evaluate instructors (Kelly-Woessner and Woessner 2006; 2008). Given my own positionality as a Black woman teaching at a service

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academy, when making the decision to revise my course, I seriously considered students' probable assumptions about my personal politics and how they might affect dynamics in my classroom, including challenges to my authority and backlash in course evaluations (Huston 2006; Pittman 2010; Reid 2010; Smith and Hawkins 2011). As is the case for many teaching and learning topics, instructors' pedagogical choices regarding whether and how to teach presidential norms must be done with attention to one's own social identities as well as broader issues of power and difference in the classroom.

### **GUIDING PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES WHEN TEACHING ABOUT PRESIDENTIAL NORMS**

The three pedagogical principles outlined in this section describe strategies that instructors can use to sidestep some of the dynamics discussed previously. These principles push students to focus on the substantive issues at the center of debates related to presidential power and the importance of adhering to norms of the office. However, no pedagogical principles are foolproof. Instructors always must adjust their instruction to their unique positionality, institutional context, class size, and student backgrounds and personalities. The goal of these guiding principles is to help instructors think systematically about their choices when designing lectures and in-class activities.

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#### **Principle #1: Provide Historical Context to Presidential Norms**

The first pedagogical principle for incorporating instruction on presidential norms is providing historical context to the emergence of these norms as well as their evolution over time. There is a long list of historical examples of presidential norms that can be incorporated easily into lectures (Banner 2019). When I added a lecture on presidential norms in my course during spring 2020, I framed our discussion around a series of "stories about presidential norms" that began with President Washington and ended in the present day with the norm violations by President Trump. Specifically, I discussed how there was no presidential term limit established in the original Constitution. Rather, I explained that the first president of the United States, George Washington, established the norm of presidents serving only two terms when he decided not to run for a third term in 1796. I followed this example with three other historical cases: Andrew Jackson violating the norm of vetoing only those bills considered unconstitutional, Woodrow Wilson reinstating the norm of delivering the State of the Union Address in person in 1913, and Richard Nixon using his law-enforcement powers via the Department of Justice to target political enemies.

Several of my students were shocked to learn that there was a long history of norm violations. Using these historical examples as a starting point pushed students to critically engage with differences in norm violations throughout American history.

In particular, it forced them to formulate arguments about the magnitude of a particular violation versus others with less partisan stake in the argument. I believe foregrounding our discussion of present-day examples with this historical context pushed my students to consider the stakes of norm-related debates beyond gut-level reactions driven by mediated partisan elite messages that they may have been exposed to in their daily life. Finally, adopting a historical approach made interweaving discussions of the stability of American democracy natural. The tone of class discussion was deliberate and less reactionary, which invited students of all partisan affiliations into the conversation.

#### **Principle #2: When Discussing Presidents Violating Norms, Incorporate Examples from Both Major Parties**

When discussing historical examples of presidential norms and those who violated them over the course of American history, I incorporated both Republican and Democratic examples. One of my Democratic examples was President Franklin Roosevelt winning a third presidential term during the 1940 election (National Constitution Center Staff 2020). This example was especially interesting because it provoked questions about how times of national crisis could make norm violations more (or less) legitimate. One of my Republican examples was President Richard Nixon's actions surrounding the Watergate scandal.

A major benefit of this approach is that it forced every student to confront a co-partisan violating a norm, which required that they formulate consistent metrics for expressing their views on the harm associated with these actions. Likewise, this framing pushed students to consider this issue as one rooted in the democratic process rather than simply falling back on partisan allegiance.

In some respects, the decision to adopt a historical approach could be risky because students may find it more difficult to connect with unfamiliar political figures and distant (and sometimes inaccessible) political debates. The Nixon case was particularly instructive in this context because I was able to directly engage with historical details being referenced in media coverage of President Trump's impeachment trial. This helped students to understand and evaluate the parallels between the two men rather than me centering my own analysis during the lecture.

Generally speaking, it is likely more effective to incorporate historical examples with direct parallels to recent events because doing so makes the course material accessible to students. During lectures, instructors can use these examples as foils to one another in their effort to solidify students' understanding of norm violations. Instructors also can use these examples to generate classroom discussion by asking students to draw connections between the two cases. Nevertheless, providing historical context should acknowledge that different levels of norm violations exist and can range from trivial to gross violations.

Another benefit of this approach is that it provides an opportunity for instructors to discuss the Constitution as an adaptive governing document. Introductory courses often frame discussions of amending the Constitution in the codification of civil liberties and the extension of civil rights to different groups in society. However, broadening this discussion to consider constitutional amendments the aim of which is to codify presidential norms offers a new vantage point for discussing the Constitution as a flexible, living document that not only adapts to protect American citizens but also serves as a tool to stabilize and reinforce the political system more generally.

When I teach this course again, I plan to add an in-class activity that asks students to document the constitutional response to the violation of the initial norm of presidents serving only two terms. When previously teaching this material, I simply told students that it was not until 1951, after Franklin Roosevelt had won an unprecedented four consecutive terms, that the 22nd Amendment was ratified and formally established a term limit for American presidents. By incorporating an in-class activity that names individual actors who called for formalizing an amendment and describes the arguments that were made in defense of (and opposition to) this proposal, students will gain a grounded perspective on how the Constitution can bend to stabilize and reinforce the American political system. The debriefing session for this activity can engage students further by asking them to think prospectively about today's norms that should be similarly codified into the Constitution.

### **Principle #3: When Discussing Norms, Incorporate Questions That Range in Difficulty and Force Students to Think Critically**

In addition to providing historical context and drawing on Democrat and Republican examples, I found that having well-structured discussion questions encouraged students to engage in thoughtful deliberation around presidential power and norms. A long line of scholarly work explores affective polarization—that is, the tendency to dislike and distrust individuals or policies from the opposing party (Iyengar et al. 2019). This work suggests that people tend to feel less comfortable in social relationships and friendships with those from the opposing party—and even to avoid engaging in conversations—with those individuals (Iyengar et al. 2019).

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Instructors can use strategically placed discussion questions to navigate the various partisan dynamics that may arise in their courses. Discussion questions allow instructors to focus the class discussion and sidestep some of the partisan bickering that might arise if the classroom discussion lacked focus and structure. In my course, I framed each class session with a “question to consider” that I posed at the beginning of the class before moving into the substantive lecture. After I covered the new material for the day, I returned to this question and invited students to share their thoughts.

This approach is useful in at least three ways. First, it gives students a framework to organize the information presented in the lecture. Second, it provides students with an objective or goal when listening to the information presented in the lecture: find ideas or information that provides support (or opposition) to a given position and form a conclusion based on their overall assessment of this evidence. Third, by presenting a motivating question at the beginning of class and returning to it after the formal lecture, students have time to contemplate their answers and think through well-reasoned arguments rather than simply relying on their gut reaction. Together, these three benefits create fertile ground for productive and generative conversations related to presidential power and norms.

I used four discussion questions as prompts to spark conversation and get students to think critically about the importance of presidential norms and expectations. I identify and explain the learning goals associated with each question in the following subsections. These questions increase in level of cognitive complexity and should be incorporated so that they build on one another. To ensure that students offer thorough responses, instructors can add statements that nudge them to justify their arguments at the end (e.g., “Why or why not?” and “Explain your reasoning”). These four questions can be incorporated into classroom discussion, short in-class writing exercises, longer discussion-board posts, and as short homework assignments following lectures.

*Discussion Question #1: How important is it that presidents adhere to norms and traditions associated with the office? Use an example discussed in class or readings to justify your answer.*

This question asks students to express their beliefs about why it is important to adhere to presidential norms and traditions (or not). It also requires that students justify their reasoning, which can spark lively discussion as they engage with one another's reasoning. It is interesting that even in the context of students adopting the same position, a lively discussion can emerge because they often arrive at these beliefs for different reasons. To directly tackle partisan bias, instructors can add a follow-up question that asks students to consider whether their reaction would be the same if the norm violation was carried out by a president from their own party versus one from the other party.

*Discussion Question #2: Is adhering to norms and traditions associated with the office of the president just as important as adhering to the separation of powers and checks and balances? Why or why not?*

This question builds on the first by having students compare the importance of adhering to norms and expectations with concepts embedded in the Constitution: separation of powers and checks and balances. This question pushes them to think about the relative importance of democratic values and ideas that are informally agreed on versus those that are explicitly written down.

Discussion Question #3: Are some forms of norm violations less problematic than others? Why is this the case? What separates acceptable and unacceptable norm violations from your perspective?

This question further builds in complexity by asking students to compare and contrast the relative importance of different types of norm violations. It forces them to consider whether their support of (opposition to) norm violations is principled (i.e., the same in every case) or context dependent. It also requires students to distinguish between what they consider acceptable versus unacceptable norm violations, which may reveal contradictions in their initial responses to Discussion Question #1.

Discussion Question #4: Under what conditions or circumstances is it okay for presidents to violate established norms and expectations? Why do these conditions/circumstances stand out as relevant in your mind? On what basis might someone counterargue that these conditions/circumstances are not justified? Why are these counterarguments insufficient in your view?

This final question asks students to describe the conditions or circumstances in which they believe violating norms and expectations is appropriate and then to justify their answer. It adds yet another layer of complexity by asking them to formulate counterarguments to their position and to defend their position against these critiques.

## CONCLUSION

This article discusses my experience in teaching students about the formal and implied powers of the executive branch and the ways in which the politics of the moment—as well as my institutional context and positionality—required me to think creatively about how to incorporate discussions of norms into my introductory American politics course. Although the politics of the current moment—the unprecedented actions of President Trump—shone a unique light on the tension between enumerated and implied powers relative to informal norms, the lessons drawn in this context can and should extend beyond this specific case. Trump's example prompts questions about the consequences of presidential norm breaking for future presidents. Will his actions create an opening for subsequent leaders to behave similarly unless drastic measures are taken, such as amending the Constitution?

Although the American political system has always been simultaneously maintained by a formal set of rules in conjunction with largely unwritten conventions of behavior, the tensions and contradictions revealed by the current political moment have forced many to reevaluate our priors and assumptions. For me, as both a political scientist and an instructor, this moment has fundamentally transformed how I plan to talk about and teach American politics, including topics related to presidential power, democratic institutions, and the stability of American democracy going forward.

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## NOTE

1. I recently conducted a search of an introductory American government syllabus using the APSA's Political Science Teaching Resource Library and Google. Of the 27 syllabi I reviewed, 18 instructors began by discussing the origin and development of government and political institutions in the United States, particularly the political philosophies of the framers of the Constitution and institutional design of the three branches of the national government. This approach leads students through a close read of the US Constitution as well as the Federalist and Anti-Federalist Papers. The goal is to have students understand enumerated powers of the three branches of the national government as well as implied powers that have developed over time through the exercise of the necessary and proper clause.

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