

# UnTextbooked

*A history podcast for the future.*

Transcript: [Is every presidency doomed to fail?](#)

Interviewer:	Lap Nguyen
Guest	Jeremi Suri, PhD
Season - Episode	2-8
Released (YYYY-MM-DD)	2021-11-11

Gabe Hostin 0:04

It doesn't matter where you fall on the political spectrum, whether you're conservative liberal or somewhere else entirely. Chances are you've been underwhelmed by the President of the United States, no matter who it is. The conventional wisdom is that these are failures of character. If only the American public could elect the right leader, things will get better. But UnTextbooked Producer Lap Nguyen disagrees.

Lap Nguyen 0:28

There's so many different factors that play into the failure of the executive office. Each president leaves their own mark, but the next president has to kind of pick up where they left off, right. So at this point, it's become, in a way the most limiting job in the world instead of the most powerful and I find that really ironic.

Gabe Hostin 0:53

Yep, wants to know why it is that more and more Americans seem disillusioned with the Commander in Chief. So you read the book, *The Impossible presidency, the rise and fall of America's highest office*, written by Dr. Jeremi Suri. On this episode of UnTextbooked lab interviews Professor Suri about how the role of the President has changed over time, and whether the office has become too big to succeed. I'm Gabe Hostin and you're listening to UnTextbooked Don't go away

Lap Nguyen 1:25

UnTextbooked. Thank you very much for joining me today Professor Suri,

Jeremi Suri, PhD 1:36

my pleasure lap. It's really exciting to have a chance to talk to you.

Lap Nguyen 1:40

So I want to start us out at the very beginning. So what was the executive branch as envisioned by the founders and how well did George Washington carry out that vision?

Jeremi Suri, PhD 1:51

That's the perfect question to start with Lappe, the founders believed in a government that had three branches of course, a legislative and executive and the judicial branch. They did believe the legislative branch should be the place where most policy is made. The executive branch was not to play a day to day policymaking role for them. They saw the executive branch more as playing the role of applying the law executing the law, as written by Congress and with very few exceptions, the President was to have a some time veto power if he wished. But the point was not for the President to be the source of new policy ideas. It was for the President to carry out the ideas that came out of the legislature where you had the representatives of the people in the states deliberating on the problems of the day. It was a much more limited role for the executive than we see today. The founders did not want presidents to be part of a party. They didn't want them to be Federalists or Jeffersonians, or Democrats or wigs or Republicans. They wanted the president to really represent everyone in the way that perhaps at least mythologically, a father figure stands above the different cousins who might be arguing within a family. The person can bring them together and say, Look, we're all one family. We have to get along. Here are some common issues. That's exactly what they wanted the president to do. And that's what Washington excelled at George Washington. He was mainly seen as a father figure in the sense of being above party, and he was to be the person who brought people together. Not everyone agreed with Washington on all issues. But almost everyone recognized that Washington had the interests of a larger United States in mind. He was one of the few southerners from Virginia that northerners could identify with. And so he played that role, that fatherly role of bringing the cousins the factions the states together. That's precisely what they wanted the president to do.

Lap Nguyen 3:48

Now, in terms of your telling of the rise of the presidency and the expansion of the executive branch, you chose to highlight three key figures in that rise with President Andrew Jackson, President Abraham Lincoln and President Theodore Roosevelt. So what made their presidency kind of stick out in terms of the early presidencies in how they shaped the executive office?

Jeremi Suri, PhD 4:15

Each of them move the presidency into a new form, they moved it forward. Jackson is 2.0 if Washington is 1.0, he's presidency 2.0 Because what Jackson does is he takes the presidency out of this Virginia Gentry elite, and he brings it to the people, white people, white men, certainly not to Indians. He brings it to Indians in a harmful way. Certainly not to slaves. He's a proponent of slavery, but to white men like himself. He makes the president more important for ordinary white men. Lincoln, through the civil war not only keeps the country together, he moves the presidency into creating opportunity for people who are still denied opportunity, including African Americans, not necessarily equal opportunity, but more opportunity. And that's really it's important for listeners to know this. That's really why the Republican Party was formed. The

Note: Transcript generated by artificial intelligence. May contain errors.

Republican Party was about free men, no slavery, free soil. Everyone can own land, free man free soil, free, free activity, free participation in our society. And in fact, some Republicans were the first suffragists also arguing that women should have the right to vote Lincoln wasn't quite there. He used the presidency to empower so many more people. And he used the presidency directly to do that in ways that actually would have astonished George Washington through land grants to create public universities. One of the most unique and important American policies 1862, creating some of our great universities, universities that will be accessible to ordinary poor citizens. He created the Homestead Act that allowed even immigrants who were not citizens to own land. Chinese were excluded but German immigrants, Mexican immigrants, and others were able to get land. If your family worked the land, you could keep the land. So he moved the presidency from helping some white people, some white man as Jackson was to now create an opportunity for a broader range of citizens, including African Americans, which is why Frederick Douglass reviewed him not just the emancipation of the slaves, but the vision of opportunity for black citizens and immigrants and others. And then I think Theodore Roosevelt is 4.0. Right? If Jackson's 2.0 And Lincoln 3.03 versus 4.0, because he takes Lincoln's vision of a country of opportunity and he makes it more international giving the United States a much greater international presence again for ill and for good to say that they change the presidency doesn't make them heroic men of marble, it makes them pioneers good and bad. So the bad is Theodore Roosevelt's greater. International vision includes more American dominance in the Caribbean, in places like Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, where we continue to see issues that are sometimes issues the United States has contributed to the problems in, but he also envisions the United States opening up more opportunities for trade and the United States being connected to a larger, growing global economy that does provide for so much more wealth and prosperity for so many, though not all Americans. And so if you go from Washington to Theodore Roosevelt, you see a completely different presidency. We use the same words, but it's totally different.

Lap Nguyen 7:31

So the common the common thread that between these three presidents that I've noticed is that there seems to be an element of populism, the willingness to kind of fight against the elites to defend the interests of the common American. Can you talk a little bit more about how that populism that external force kind of kind of pressured these individuals to to expand the office?

Jeremi Suri, PhD 7:55

Great question lap. I think it is organic in the sense that Congress is very slow to catch up with the needs of the country. It's very hard to move a country as large as ours by legislation alone. And so groups that feel that even if they can elect some members of Congress, they can't move Congress. They turn to the executive right as our country grows. This is one of my points and as there are more demands that the legislature is unable to address quickly, there's more of a desire for quite frankly, a strong man, a good man, a benevolent man, maybe we might even say a father figure to actually step in to step in and fix these things, right. Just fix this. I mean, I

Note: Transcript generated by artificial intelligence. May contain errors.

can't tell how many times I've heard people say I wish Joe Biden would just fix this, right? It's not that easy. But the President faces that pressure, and has that incentive to act.

Lap Nguyen 8:45

So one of the points that you mentioned was kind of the inherent weakness of our government in a time of crisis because of how slow it can be and how kind of tedious the process of lawmaking can be. And this kind of culminates in, in the expansion of the executive branch during the one of the greatest crisis of our of our times, which is the Great Depression and the subsequent enter entry into World War Two. And so you made a point of really highlighting the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the turning point in the role that the executive play, what did he do that was so much different than everyone that came before him? And then how did he set up the presidency so that those that will come after him have a very difficult time trying to fulfill all of the promises that he made to the American public?

Jeremi Suri, PhD 9:40

It's such a great question lap it you know, it's the paradox at the center of the book, the man who I think is in some ways, the most successful modern president and he deserves our praise and more for that. The things he does actually almost make it impossible for there to be another great President. Like that under the current system. Franklin Roosevelt is the first person really to move the presidency from now a policymaking military economic position, into a very personal part of every citizens life. Before the 1930s. People didn't think the President was going to help them. They argued over which president they liked. They argued over policy. Of course they did. But they really didn't think that the President was going to help them for example, if they lost their job, or if they didn't have health care or if they're if they were being lynched if their civil rights were being violated. They looked maybe to Congress, they look primarily to governors, and to mayors, etc. Presidents were distant from the public and they were physically distant to most people saw pictures of the president. They never actually saw the President in the flesh rarely heard his voice, rarely heard his voice, Herbert Hoover's, one of the first presidents to be heard over the radio. So they're distant, they're distant figures. We have to remember that it's different from our world in the context of the Depression. Beyond the policy, Roosevelt recognizes the President has a therapeutic role to play and people sometimes criticize this but I think that's so short sighted the historian in me points out I think, how necessary it was during the Great Depression. As I think it is today lap for people who feel that they are surrounded by horror and mistreatment, whether right or wrong, they feel that they need to believe there's someone who cares about them with power.

The truth is, the average person has very little power to change the world. What keeps you going is your belief that someone cares and and that's what FDR conveys that he is the president who cares he makes people believe it and it's the most extraordinary thing that down and out citizens of all kinds who are so different from Rose Well, he's an elite, right? The man is never actually had to work for a paycheck. He still collects an allowance from his mommy while he's president. That's how he had the fancy cigarette holders, right? But nonetheless, he

conveys empathy. And I think that changes everything because now the presidency becomes a focus for so many of our problems, concerns, interests and hopes. So much is placed on that one man and he does an extraordinary job during the Depression, not of solving the problems of the economy overnight or even through the whole time he's president. But of getting people reengaged one of my favorite examples lap is the banking system is collapsing. People are pulling their money out of banks. I mean, hopefully you and I will never experience as a bank run. You know, at people literally putting their money into their mattresses, any of your listeners who have still some relatives who were alive then I'm sure they have money under a mattress. He comes on the radio and asks people put your money back in the bank. The only way the banking system works is if you put your money back and if you don't deposit your money, there's no money in the economy. Loans can't be given to the local restaurant, the local restaurant can't make food, they can't hire people, etc. And people listen to him. They trust him. He uses the radio. He uses storytelling and he uses policy to do this. He creates agencies. They're terribly inefficient. But they're agencies that bring resources and connection to people. The Civilian Conservation Corps is the one we as historians always like to point to millions of young men and women the age of many of your listeners, perhaps 18 to 30, who have no chance of getting a job. The unemployment rate is beyond 25% have no chance of getting a job. They get hired and put in work camps, to go build pathways in national parks. And then to the WPA, they're involved in building schools planting trees. They get paid a little bit of money. That's not really the issue. They get to feel they're part of something they're not sitting around depressed. There are elements of this we have to say that are fascist. This is what fascist governments did. What's extraordinary about Roosevelt is that he's doing this not for fascism, but for democracy. He's not building himself up as the infallible leader. He's He's not taking away electoral choice from people. He's actually doing it to strengthen democracy. Saul Bellow. The great writer says and I quote this in the book that we were fortunate, we had a man of that skill, who also understood and valued democracy in the way in the way he did, and I think that changes everything. I think the presidency I'm describing here is in some sense, the presidency we've all inherited. I think we have had equally talented people in the presidency since Franklin Roosevelt, maybe with one exception. And these are these are people who have generally also wanted to do the right thing for the country. Not all of them are people I liked. Some of them are people I didn't vote for. That doesn't matter. I think they were good men, and generally quite talented and they had certainly many talented people around them. The problem is not the intentionality nor the skill. The problem is that they had too much on their plate. The President is now the SOS for so many issues, in part because Congress often doesn't do its job in part because other countries create problems, right? The President is constantly in crisis mode. And what I try to show is pretty much every president since Roosevelt finds themselves long a long way through their presidency, saying, oh my gosh, I've spent a lot of time working superduper hard to prevent things from getting worse. But I haven't had time to actually work on the things I really, really care about.

Note: Transcript generated by artificial intelligence. May contain errors.

And you mentioned kind of solutions to this issue of this ballooning executive branch. Is it possible to return to that smaller executive branch? Or do our solutions have to account for the fact that it's going to stay kind of large and cumbersome for the foreseeable future?

Jeremi Suri, PhD 15:52

So I don't have a firm answer on that. But my my view based on the historical research and reading and thinking I've done is that our country is so big, so involved in so many places, and so many decisions need to be made. And for better or worse, a legislature is going to be a slow moving entity. So we do need an executive but we don't necessarily need to put it all in the hands of one person. The Founding Fathers when they think about the presidency at the Constitutional Convention, they have a debate, should it be 123 How many people and they say one because they say it's going to be really small office. So just by their logic, I say well, it's a really big office now. There's a lot to do it probably shouldn't be just one person. And we do also know as historians and this is really what drives my thinking. Too much power in any one person's hands even corrupts Mother Teresa, right. I mean, no one should have that much power, power is corrupting. And so I think we need to be creative about thinking of ways in which we can divide executive power, not to create more factionalism and partisanship, just the opposite. To create more efficacy, as I argue in the book, I think Obama would have been very well served. If he could have focused on either the domestic or the foreign. Now of course they come together it's artificial to divide them. But you could have someone who has primary responsibility for one and someone has primary responsibility for the other. I don't know any university that's one run by one person. Right. They usually have a president and a provost. The Provost does the day to day Academic Affairs. The President does the fundraising and the overall economic affairs. Same with most businesses, right? We need to have a conversation about this. It's too much for one person, and we have to find a way to divide it up.

Lap Nguyen 17:35

Now I want to just push back a little Wouldn't that kind of forced us into the same trap of partisanship and potentially you know clashing of ideas amongst our own executives. So when we need to be figuring out how to solve the crisis that comes up as fast as we can, wouldn't, adding another person kind of bogged down the executive and turn it into a smaller version of Congress, for instance,

Jeremi Suri, PhD 18:00

it could it depends how we do it. It very well could do that. But we could go to a system where we have one or two or three executives, who are staggered in their election have different roles, but are responsive to the needs of the country. as a whole. There would still be partisan differences, no doubt. But I, for example, firmly believe that our differences are not as a whole. They're based in different pockets like Florida and my own Texas and elsewhere, but not in the country as a whole. Same thing when it comes to health. Care. When it comes to war and peace issues. It's not that our country isn't divided, but it's not as divided as it's made to be by a system that splices everything up in unequal ways. Imagine if we move to a world where we had

Note: Transcript generated by artificial intelligence. May contain errors.

two people who were actually elected, truly elected by the people as a whole. So I'm talking now about getting rid of the Electoral College also, which is a historical antiquity. We don't have to go necessarily to just a popular vote. You could wait it a little bit so all regions matter. But right now, a vote in California or Texas matters is something like 190 of a vote in Wyoming. This makes no sense. It's undemocratic in every way.

Lap Nguyen 19:16

So a solution of say power delegation might involve the changing of the Constitution, which is quite lengthy, whereas another solution that you proposed is just establishing new boundaries of the executive branch, something that, you know, Congress has given responsibilities to the presidents in the past and they can always revoke that. So what are some of the boundaries that we should be setting for the executive branch moving forward? Because it seems like if we were to pursue some of these ideas, this one would seem to be the most feasible?

Jeremi Suri, PhD 19:49

Yes, I do agree, though. I do also think constitutional amendments are something we need to talk about. And we go through waves in our history about every 60-70 years when we finally amend the Constitution, the Civil War amendments think of the amendments in the early 20th century, a number of amendments around the 1950s and 60s, including giving 18 year olds the right to vote in early 1970s. I think we're ready for a bunch of amendments now and I actually think lap if your generation were actually the ones driving our politics, we'd have a lot of those amendments, right. So I do think we could have we can and should have constitutional amendments, but I think your other point is in the short run, what are some of the other things we can do and absolutely dead on right, that Congress can change the ways in which the executive operates, especially with regard to two powers that Congress actually really has in the constitution? So the most obvious one, the one that's probably most important also is war. Powers. Congress has largely delegated the use of military force to the president after 911. The authorization for military force is basically a blank check, like the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution for Johnson and 64. And we presidents have had pretty much free rein to send our military force and now use drones. To kill people wherever they want. So Congress could take back its basic article one power, and really enforce that the President has to get approval from Congress and maybe even have a way of paying for it. When he sends forces overseas. That could still be an exception in there if we're attacked. But when it's not a case where attacks, right Congress should have I think we we would fight better wars, because if Congress has to actually approve it, the American people are more likely to be behind it. They were created by Congress, they can be redesigned by Congress, and I actually think it would make presidents more effective. I think too much power is undermining the ability of presidents to do the few things they should do. Well, the government changes when people in office force it to change and you don't have to be president or senator or congressman to make that happen. So it's at the local level, and it works its way up. And I really think the calling for your generation. I'm going to call it the millennials and Gen Z is to get in the arena, as Theodore Roosevelt said to get in there, get elected, maybe make some personal sacrifices for that no one should live in poverty. But maybe

Note: Transcript generated by artificial intelligence. May contain errors.

you don't need to be rich. Use your talent to get into government and start making these changes. The old men are hanging around too long. And it is time it is long time for the young women and young men to step in.

Lap Nguyen 22:20

Thank you. Thank you so very much. And for our listeners. Dr. Jeremi Suri is the author of the book *The Impossible presidency*, Professor Suri where can we find more of your work?

Jeremi Suri, PhD 22:31

Well, I publish stuff all the time. But maybe what's most interesting for your audience is I have a weekly podcast called *This Is democracy*. We take contemporary issues, and we talk about the history of those issues, and how that history can help us see positive ways forward. It's supposed to be optimistic, using history to be optimistic. So I hope I hope your listeners if they have a chance, they'll listen. Thank you very much. My pleasure. Thank you lap.

Gabe Hostin 23:06

Dr. Jeremi Suri is a Professor of Public Affairs and History at the University of Texas Austin. He also has his own podcast called *This Is democracy*. Latin when is a sophomore at Harvard University. Our website is [untextbooked.org](http://untextbooked.org) We're on social media at UnTextbooked. Our music is by Silas Bowen and Coleman Hamilton. UnTextbooked is edited by Bethany Denton and Jeff emtman. Fernande raine is our executive producer. UnTextbooked is a project of Got history, an organization that believes in a world where all young people can advance civic well being for themselves, society and the planet. Thanks for listening

**Please Note:** Transcript generated by artificial intelligence and may contain inaccuracies.