

## No Blank Check

Concerns about unaccountable executive power have featured recurrently in political debates from the American founding to today. For many, presidents' use of unilateral power threatens American democracy. *No Blank Check* advances a new perspective: Instead of finding Americans apathetic towards how presidents exercise power, it shows the public is deeply concerned with core democratic values. Drawing on data from original surveys, innovative experiments, historical polls, and contexts outside the United States, the book highlights Americans' skepticism towards presidential power. This skepticism results in a public that punishes unilaterally minded presidents and the policies they pursue. By departing from existing theories of presidential power which acknowledge only institutional constraints, this timely and revealing book demonstrates the public's capacity to tame the unilateral impulses of even the most ambitious presidents. Ultimately, when it comes to exercising power, the public does not hand the president a blank check.

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Andrew Reeves , Jon C. Rogowski  
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*The Origins and Consequences of Public Antipathy  
towards Presidential Power*

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As the semester began in the fall of 2013, it seemed that the United States was moving towards a war footing in Syria. Near the end of August, more than a thousand people had been killed outside Damascus in a chemical weapons attack. Intelligence reports indicated that the attack had been carried out by the Syrian government under its president, Bashar al-Assad. A year earlier, American President Barack Obama indicated that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime would constitute a “red line” and prompt a US military response. As haunting images of those killed and injured by the attacks circulated around the world, military personnel, defense analysts, and even Obama himself appeared to believe that military intervention was inevitable.

But that isn’t what happened. Rather than initiate military strikes by invoking the president’s war powers, as Obama and his predecessors had done in similar situations, at the end of the month President Obama instead announced that he would seek congressional authorization before conducting military strikes in Syria.

Like many other projects, this book has its origins in hallway conversations. *Why had Obama forgone the opportunity to exercise a power he conceivably could have claimed? Why didn’t he follow through on a threat he himself had made?* That we were asking these questions suggested to us that political science scholarship on the presidency had missed something important about presidential decision-making. Through these discussions in Seigle Hall at Washington University in St. Louis, we began our collaboration to discover why presidents sometimes choose *not* to exercise authority they might claim to advance preferences they appear to hold.

### *Acknowledgments*

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We conducted a survey later in the fall of 2013 in a first attempt to make headway on this question. Fortuitously, our colleague John Patty invited us to co-organize a conference at Washington University in St. Louis that was held the following summer. There, we presented our initial findings on the nature of public attitudes about presidential power. We are grateful to John for the opportunity to invite an impressive group of scholars to St. Louis. We are also grateful to conference participants, particularly Chuck Cameron, for incisive and formative feedback on the project at this early stage.

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