

SMOOTHING THE PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF DEMOCRATIC POWER

Report 2017—46

**OBSERVATIONS OF SIX PRESIDENTS AND THEIR
INTERCHANGES WITH REPORTERS
100 DAYS INTO THE ADMINISTRATION**

Martha Joynt Kumar, *Professor Emeritus, Towson University
Director, the White House Transition Project*

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Even at the 100 day mark in an administration, there are outlines of where and when presidents prefer to meet with reporters. The following five observations explain some aspects of the trends in the interchanges with reporters of Presidents Trump, Obama, George W. Bush, Clinton, George H. W. Bush and Reagan. The presidential interchanges with reporters statistics then follow these observations. There are three basic types of press interchanges with reporters: first, press conferences (joint and solo); second, short question and answer sessions where a president responds to a question from one or more reporters (pooled events where one reporter represents the group of White House reporters); third, interviews with one or more reporters in sessions that are on or off the record. **These three types of presidential interchanges with reporters represent over 33% of the events that the most recent three presidents have held.**

1. ***Presidential Interchanges with Reporters Are a Permanent Feature of the Presidency Representing Over One Third of Their Public Remarks.*** It may be out of their comfort zone, but presidents have met reporters on a regular basis since presidential press conferences first began in March 1913 when President Woodrow

Wilson convened his first session. All of the presidents following Wilson have held such sessions. Including President Trump, all sixteen presidents who succeeded Wilson followed his practice of holding press conferences.

In the last 25 years, though, presidents have adapted to new media and transparency demands to expand the number of venues where they respond to reporters' questions, especially through interviews and short question and answer sessions that fall below the press conference standard.

Presidents Trump, Obama, and George W. Bush were quite similar in the percentages of all of their public remarks, speeches, press interchanges that involved taking questions from the press. **Their percentages for the first hundred days are: Trump 43 %, Obama 36 %, and George W. Bush 36 %.** President Clinton was the outlier with over half of his events – 55 % - involved responding to reporters' queries. Presidents George H. W. Bush and Reagan were the lowest of the group with 25 % and 27 %.

2. ***Presidential Flexibility in Choosing Press Venues.*** President George H. W. Bush developed a venue – joint press conferences with foreign leaders - that suited him and his successors as well. Once it was clear how useful joint press conferences were as an instrument of foreign policy for putting the President and his guest on the record about their meeting, his successors followed his example. In fact, Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama had more joint sessions than they did solo ones. President Trump has followed this pattern as well. For presidents, joint sessions have the added benefit of answering questions from four to six reporters rather than three times that number in an extended full solo press conference session. The risks of making remarks that might need further explanation and cleanup are much higher in a solo press conference than in joint sessions. All of President George H. W. Bush's successors have followed the pattern of joint press conferences he developed later in his presidency.

The breakdown of joint and solo press conferences for the three most recent presidents are: Presidents Trump 9 [1 Solo; 8 Joint]; Obama 12 [6 Solo, 6 Joint]; George W. Bush 5 [2 Solo; 3 Joint]. President George H. W. Bush had 11 press conferences [9 Solo, 2 Joint]. President Reagan did not have any joint sessions during his eight years in office and had two press conferences. He was shot March 30 and held few April events.

3. ***Presidential Interviews Now Outpace Press Conferences and Short Question and Answer Sessions.*** President Trump has had more interviews with reporters than have any of his five previous predecessors. With 49 interviews in his first 100 days, Trump was in close competition with Obama who had 46. George W. Bush had 19 with Clinton, George H. W. Bush, and Reagan having fewer still. Additionally, President Trump had phone calls he placed to reporters and “pull-ins” where with no prior arrangement, reporters who were in the West Wing talking to staff were brought in to talk with the president. While I have captured a few of those instances, there are more to be found.

Like President George H. W. Bush, President Obama too established a new communications pattern by favoring meetings with reporters in interview sessions. President Trump shares Obama's fondness for interviews as a communications tool. With people no longer reading newspapers and watching the network evening news as they once did, presidents have gradually sought alternate venues where they could address their constituents while also addressing targeted audiences whose support they need to reach their policy goals. They have reduced their solo press conferences and even

short question and answer sessions in favor of specialized interviews where the president and his staff can choose their audiences as well as the time and place where they meet them.

Presidents George W. Bush and Trump favored interviews where they could get to a national audience as did Obama though to a lesser degree (82% Trump, 84% Bush with 50% for Obama). Interviews allow a president to target several audiences they are interested in reaching. President Obama, for example, focused on local interviews (22 % to Trump's 6 %) and specialty audiences (15 % for Obama and 6 % for Trump) during his presidency as he sought to target supporters for his domestic agenda at the grass roots level, particularly with African American and Latino audiences.

Of the six presidents, there is a clear trend towards television interviews and away from the earlier pattern of print ones. Sixty-five percent of President Obama's interviews were television ones contrasting with Trump's 45%. Trump had 35% of his with print. [Fourteen percent of Trump's interviews were "mixed" with reporters who used their interviews for more than one publication, such as online, print, and radio or television. With the exception of President Clinton (44% print and 44% radio), Presidents George W. Bush (63%), George H. W. Bush (75%), and Reagan (69%), all favored print over television for their interviews in their first 100 days.

4. ***Short Question and Answer Sessions Continue as a Fill-In Between Press Conferences.*** Once they went on-the-record early in President Eisenhower tenure, press conferences became less frequent. In recent years, short question-and-answer sessions have filled in as sessions where a president takes a few questions prior to or after a meeting. The advantage for reporters is that you get a response to breaking news, but the downside is that in such sessions the president rarely takes more than one or two questions.

The most recent six presidents demonstrate a difference in their taste for such sessions. Presidents Trump and Obama had comparatively little liking for the sessions where a president is called on to respond at the moment to unfolding events where the state of play is often unknown. Trump held 21 of them and Obama 18. Presidents George W. Bush (53) and Clinton (130) were aggressive in their use of short question-and-answer sessions in their first 100 days.

5. ***Do Early Patterns Foreshadow Trends in Presidential Press Interchanges?*** In important ways, early 100 day patterns remain throughout a president's term in office. One of the important patterns established in recent years is the gradual reduction in presidential speeches. That diminution shows up in the 100 day numbers from the recent high point of 180 speeches and remarks of President George W. Bush to the recent 122 of President Trump with President Obama in between at 154. As presidents reduce their number of speeches, they increase their numbers of interchanges with reporters as a way of getting to their general and select audiences.

Presidents Trump and Obama supplemented their speeches with interviews as their primary forum for responding to reporters' questions. Presidents George W. Bush and Clinton were more likely to use short question-and-answer sessions than interviews in their early days and throughout their terms in office. In an era of three television networks and citizens closely following their evening news programs, President Reagan

developed presidential news conferences as a major prime time news event. In his early days in office, however, his interviews with major print publications were a more prominent aspect of his publicity. His prime time news conferences soon became his signature venue for meeting with reporters, but his successors found that television networks were less willing to provide presidents with a similar opportunity. Thus, they looked for other venues where they could respond to reporters asking questions.

**SIX PRESIDENTS AND THEIR INTERCHANGES WITH REPORTERS
THROUGH APRIL 29, 2017
100 DAYS INTO THE ADMINISTRATION¹**

Martha Joynt Kumar

- Press conferences, January 20, 2017 – April 29, 2017: 9 [1 Solo and 8 Joint]
- Short question-and-answer sessions, January 20, 2001- April 29, 2017: 21
- Interviews, January 20, 2017 – April 29, 2017: 49
- Addresses and remarks: 122

PRESS CONFERENCES

President Donald Trump: Press Conferences

January 20 2017 – April 29 2017: 9 [1Solo; 8 Joint]

White House Solo: 1

Nighttime East Room: 0

President Barack Obama: Press Conferences

January 20 2009 – April 29 2009: 12 [6 Solo, 6 Joint]

White House Solo: 3

Nighttime East Room: 3 [February 9 2009, March 24 2009, April 29 2009]

President George W. Bush: Press Conferences

January 20 2001 – April 29 2001: 5 [2 Solo; 3 Joint]

White House Solo: 2

Nighttime East Room: 0

President Bill Clinton: Press Conferences

January 20 1993 – April 29 1993: 13 [4 Solo; 9 Joint]

White House Solo: 4

Nighttime East Room: 0

President George H. W. Bush: Press Conferences

January 20 1989 – April 29 1993: 11 [9 Solo; 2 Joint]

White House Solo: 7

Nighttime East Room: 0

President Ronald Reagan: Press Conferences

January 20 1981 – April 29 1981: 2 [2 Solo; 0 Joint]

White House Solo: 2 [Reagan was shot March 30; almost no April events]

¹ See Appendix for descriptions of categories.

Nighttime East Room: 0

SHORT QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSIONS

President Donald Trump: Short question and answer sessions

January 20 2017 – April 29 2017: 21

President Barack Obama: Short question and answer sessions

January 20 2009 – April 29 2009: 18

President George W. Bush: Short question and answer sessions

January 20 2001 – April 29 2001: 53

President Bill Clinton: Short question and answer sessions

January 20 1993 – April 29 1993: 84

President George H. W. Bush: Short question and answer sessions

January 20 1989 – April 29 1989: 10

President Ronald Reagan: Short question and answer sessions

January 20 1981 – April 29 1981: 5 [Reagan was shot March 30; almost no April events]

INTERVIEWS

President Donald Trump: Interviews

January 20 2017 – April 29 2017: 49

President Barack Obama: Interviews

January 20 2009 – April 29 2009: 46

President George W. Bush: Interviews

January 20 2001 – April 29 2001: 19

President Bill Clinton: Interviews

January 20 1993 – April 29 1993: 9

President George H. W. Bush: Interviews

January 20 1989 – April 29 1989: 12

President Ronald Reagan: Interview

January 20 1989 – April 29 1981: 16 [Reagan was shot March 30; almost no April events]

*ADDRESSES AND REMARKS***President Donald Trump: Addresses and remarks**

January 20 2017 – April 29 2017: 122 [2 Address Nation / Joint Session; 14 Weekly Address; 106 Remarks]

President Barack Obama: Addresses and remarks

January 20 2017 – April 29 2017: 154 [2 Address Nation / Joint Session; 14 Weekly Address; 138 Remarks]

President George W. Bush: Addresses and remarks

January 20 2017 – April 29 2017: 180 [2 Address Nation / Joint Session; 14 Weekly Address; 164 Remarks]

President Bill Clinton: Addresses and remarks

January 20 1993 – April 29 1993: 113 [3 Address Nation / Joint Session; 12 Weekly Address; 98 Remarks]

President George H. W. Bush: Addresses and remarks

January 20 1989 – April 29 1989: 109 [2 Address Nation / Joint Session; 0 Weekly Address; 107 Remarks]

President Ronald Reagan: Addresses and remarks

January 20 1989 – April 29 1981: 62 [4 Address Nation / Joint Session; 0 Weekly Address; 58 Remarks] [Reagan was shot March 30; almost no April events]

*PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL SPEECHES AND PRESS INTERCHANGES WHERE REPORTERS POSED QUESTIONS***President Donald Trump: Percent of Public Utterances that Involve Answering Reporter Questions**

January 20 2017 – April 29 2017: 43 %

President Barack Obama: Percent of Public Utterances that Involve Answering Reporter Questions

January 20 2009 – April 29 2009: 36 %

President George W. Bush: Percent of Public Utterances that Involve Answering Reporter Questions

January 20 2001 – April 29 2001: 36 %

President Bill Clinton: Percent of Public Utterances that Involve Answering Reporter Questions

January 20 1993 – April 29 1993: 55 %

President George H. W. Bush: Percent of Public Utterances that Involve Answering Reporter Questions

January 20 1989 – April 29 1989: 25 %

President Ronald Reagan: Percent of Public Utterances that Involve Answering Reporter Questions

January 20 1989 – April 29 1981: 27 % [Reagan was shot March 30; almost no April events]

APPENDIX

The figures here are based on counts of official public events as found in White House press releases and cross-checked with, first, the *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents* [earlier from the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*] published by the National Archives and Records Administration and, second, the entries of public presidential utterances included in the *Public Papers of the President* as found on The American Presidency website, www.americanpresidency.org, and third, the presidential schedule and press releases for each day that I receive from the Press Office. My headings are based on ones used by the National Archives though I aggregate them into my own categories. President Reagan kept a personal diary that I also use to find his contacts with reporters. Additionally, I include sessions that may not appear in the public record that reporters had with the President and discussed with me when the meetings took place, where, and what transpired in those encounters.

PRESS CONFERENCES. Press conferences are divided into Solo and Joint sessions. The latter are usually held together with a foreign leader where each answers questions from an equal number of reporters evenly divided between the foreign and White House press corps members present. Both leaders first make statements, usually about what was discussed in their meeting, and then take questions. Solo sessions tend to be longer ones. I have noted how many Solo sessions a president has held in the White House compound. I have also noted how many of the Solo sessions were prime time East Room press conferences. President George H. W. Bush is the first president to use Joint press conferences on a regular basis and his successors have continued the trend he began. His predecessors did so only occasionally.

SHORT QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSIONS. “Short question and answer sessions” are events where only a small number of reporters representing the White House press corps – a pool - are allowed in to question the President. This category is composed of the National Archives designation of “Exchanges with Reporters” where the President may or may not make remarks at the same time. If he has a speech that is designated by the National Archives as “Remarks and Exchange with Reporters,” it is counted twice in my tabulations. His remarks are counted separately in the “Addresses and Remarks” category while the interchange with reporters is counted in the “Short Question and Answer Sessions.”

INTERVIEWS. Interview is a straightforward designation for a presidential conversation with reporter(s) of varying length. Interviews pose a particular challenge, as they are owned by the news organization and, except for interviews with foreign reporters; it is up to the organization to decide whether to release the text. The White House releases the transcript of interviews that will be translated into a foreign language in order to establish the record of the president’s remarks in English. The interviews tabulated here for Presidents Trump, Obama, George W. Bush, and Clinton come from internal White House sources as well as some initially from news sources, including those conducting the interviews, and in *The Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents* published online by the Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/collection.action?collectionCode=CPD> .

I also use as a source the American Presidency Project where they use the same information from the National Archives but where one can easily search across administrations, which is not as easy

to do with the *Daily Compilation*: The American Presidency website is: <http://presidency.proxied.lsit.ucsb.edu/ws/>

When I find sessions from Pool Reports where reporters talked to the President at the back of Air Force One on an off-the-record or on-the-record basis or at the White House when reporters encounter him in passing and ask a question(s), I am including those sessions under interviews. I see these sessions / encounters as somewhat similar to the phone calls I have listed under interviews for Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush found in the President's Daily Diary. an interview for its Sunday program on an evening newscast earlier in the week. If it is one interview, I do not count them as two separate ones as it was scheduled as one interview. For its part, the White House sometimes schedules a major television interview in more than one part. The instances follow in 2009-2011 where President Obama did two separate interviews for a television program, such as a seated interview in the Blue Room followed by a "walk-and-talk" along the Colonnade, I count them as two interviews. Where I can find them, I include off the record sessions with the names of journalists news organizations

For the interview numbers for Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush, I have used the White House Daily Diary, which is compiled from official internal records by the Diarist, an employee of the National Archives and Records Administration. Until recently the Reagan personal and Daily Diary were online through the Reagan Foundation website at: <http://www.reaganfoundation.org/white-house-diary.aspx>. The Daily Diary is no longer available at that site but now can be found at the Reagan Library website at: <https://reaganlibrary.gov/digital-library/daily-diary>. President Reagan's personal diary is no longer available at those two sites. The Daily Diary for President George H. W. Bush is available through the Miller Center at the University of Virginia. Their diary information only goes through October 1990. The full White House Daily Diary for President George H. W. Bush is available at the George H. W. Bush Library in College Station, Texas. That is the diary I used. For Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush, the President's Daily Diary offers a more complete picture of the president's interactions with those associated with news organizations because the diaries capture the phone calls they place and those they receive. Even when they are brief, I include these phone contacts in my counts because the information exchanged between the president and the journalist will be used in some way by them and / or their news organizations in their articles or planning of their news coverage. The White House Daily Diary for Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton have not yet been made public so that excellent source is not yet available. When the Diaries are available, I will go back through my lists and update with phone calls with reporters and other interviews that were not included in their internal lists.

SPEECHES. Speeches to Joint Sessions of Congress, State of the Union, Inaugural Addresses, and Addresses to the Nation form my category, Addresses to the Nation. The Weekly Addresses category includes formal Radio Addresses in the Reagan, George W. Bush and Clinton administrations as well as the radio addresses in the Obama and Trump administrations that are titled "Weekly Address" presented on several platforms, including YouTube and television as well as radio. Other radio addresses are included in Radio Addresses as well, such as those given by George H. W. Bush who did not regularly do weekly radio addresses as did the others. President Reagan was the first president to adopt and then maintain a practice of delivering weekly radio addresses. Except for President George H. W. Bush, all of his successors have followed his practice from the early days of their administrations. Any Radio Addresses by any of the six presidents was put into the Radio Addresses category. All other remarks and speeches publicly given by the President form my "addresses and remarks" subcategory.

Data Collected by Martha Joynt Kumar, Professor Emeritus, Department of Political Science, Towson University and Director, White House Transition Project. For permission to quote information, contact me at marthakumar1600@gmail.com or 202 285-3537. 6/9/17 11:09 PM