



**THE WHITE HOUSE
TRANSITION PROJECT**
1997—2017

RICE UNIVERSITY'S
BAKER INSTITUTE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY

SMOOTHING THE PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF DEMOCRATIC POWER

Report 2017—46

COMPARING FIRST AND SECOND YEAR 100 DAY PERIODS
PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS LEARNING AND PREFERENCES

Martha Joynt Kumar, Director
The White House Transition Project

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WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

The White House Transition Project. Established in 1997 to provide information to incoming White House staff members so that they can hit the ground running, The White House Transition Project includes a group of presidency scholars from across the country who participate in writing essays about past transitions and the inner workings of key White House offices. Since its creation, it has participated in the 2001, 2009 and now the 2017 presidential transitions with the primary goal of streamlining the process and enhancing the understanding of White House operations. WHTP maintains an important, international dimension by consulting with foreign governments and organizations interested in improving governmental transitions.
<http://whitehousetransitionproject.org>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Responding to reporters' queries has been a consistent part of a president's public presentations. Among the six most recent presidents, a third or more of their public appearances were ones where they responded to reporters' questions.
- A comparison of the first 100 days of a president's time in office and the same January 20 – April 29 period in the second year demonstrates how presidents make the publicity transition from being a state official or figure to a national one. President Reagan, for example, made the transition from the first to second period by adding a weekly radio address to the nation to his communications tools as well as adding in nighttime East Room press conferences.
- Despite their differences, presidents are similar in the numbers of speeches and interchanges with the press they have. Presidents Obama, George W. Bush, and Clinton had similar numbers of speeches through their first 465 days. Obama: 645; George W. Bush 698; Clinton 630. Presidents have similar numbers for their press interchanges as well, especially the three most recent ones. The numbers are: Trump 292; Obama 272; George W. Bush 270.
- Where the presidents differ is the venues they choose to meet with the press, including press conferences, interviews, and short question and answer sessions. President Trump, for example, routinely responds to a few questions every day or two while President Obama favored long form interviews where he could discuss policy.
- Presidents most often favor publicity forums they used in their previous positions and in their campaigns. If a president came into office through effectively using television as Reagan did, then he will feature it as a way to get to the public. The same is true with President Trump and his use of Twitter to start the day.



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Once a president begins his tenure, he becomes a national figure speaking to the whole of the nation. Doing so requires him to develop forums and strategies that broaden his reach from the state to the national level. Making that transition requires the president and his staff to develop their communications platforms and find out what forums and strategies they are effective and comfortable using. All six presidents have developed their own preferences of where, when, and how often they meet with reporters, but they all do so.

- A. **CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE EARLY MONTHS.** Together, the 100 day period from January 20-April 29th in the first year and a comparable one in the second year provide us with a point where we can see how presidents adjust to their office and what preferences they have in how they communicate with the public. There are rhythms to the year in terms of addresses to Congress, presenting the budget and legislative initiatives as well as international conferences, all occurring around the same time and driving the national conversation. The presidential schedule of appearances helps to establish a rhythm to the communications events of the year: conferences, budget, congressional schedule.
 1. *Joint Sessions of Congress.* Throughout the whole period from Presidents Reagan through Trump, there is a consistent history of the Addresses to a Joint Session of Congress. All presidents give an inaugural address and then in the first year all give a February address to a Joint Session of Congress that deals most often with the economy. As a newcomer to the office, the President is not ready in his first month to give a State of the Union address. That waits until the second year when all six president gave their addresses around the same time in late January, early February.
 2. *Address to the Nation.* There is no specific pattern as Addresses to the Nation depend more on events and specialty initiatives than is true with Joint Sessions. They occur at random rather than scheduled points in a year and there are fewer of them. The figures reflect the growing reluctance of presidents and of television networks to take time for such addresses unless there is a major event, such as when President Obama asked for

time at 11:35 pm on May 1, 2011, a Sunday evening to announce the death of Osama bin Laden.

3. *Similar Total Numbers of Presidential Speeches and Press Interchanges.* The expectations for presidents are fairly similar even if the presidents vary in their party affiliation, issue interests, their constituency coalitions. Similar public expectations for when a president speaks and answers reporters' questions all lead them to appear publicly a similar number of times. Presidents Obama, George W. Bush, and Clinton had similar numbers of speeches through their first 465 days. Obama: 645; George W. Bush 698; Clinton 630. These figures represent an increase from George H. W. Bush [518] and Ronald Reagan [309]. President Trump [533] is more similar to George H. W. Bush in his speeches and remarks numbers than he is to his three recent predecessors. He doesn't travel as much as they did nor does he give set speeches from the White House with the frequency they did. The remarks he gives are often at the top or bottom of a meeting with executives and foreign leaders in the Oval Office, the Roosevelt Room, or the Cabinet Room.

The presidents have similar numbers for their press interchanges as well, especially the three most recent ones. The numbers are: Trump 292; Obama 272; George W. Bush 270. Clinton was an outlier with a high of 441 and George H. W. Bush [196] and Reagan [140] were at the low end. For all of Reagan's appearance figures for his first hundred days, it is important to remember he was shot on March 30th and spent more than a month recovering from his wounds with few appearances.

Presidential appearance patterns demonstrate the rhythms and expectations associated with the presidency. People expect to hear a president speak and to answer reporters' question. They do so though we can see they make different choices in what forums they choose to meet with reporters.

4. *Presidents Use Publicity Forums They Favored During Their Campaigns.* Presidents most often favor publicity forums they used in their previous positions and in their campaigns. If a president came into office through effectively using television as Reagan did, then he will feature it as a way to get to the public. Thus, it is no surprise that Reagan was a president who made full use of nighttime East Room press conferences where the ornaments of the presidency are on full display and where he gathered a national audience.

As an actor in movies and on television, he understood what makes a picture and the impact of commanding images. He began his media career as a radio broadcaster and included it in his presidential publicity forums with his Saturday morning radio addresses, which he wrote by hand and delivered live. President Trump followed much the same model by continuing to communicate with his constituents through Twitter and to a larger audience through spur-of-the-moment sessions with White House reporters where he selectively answered questions. Both communications forums were integral parts of his presidential campaign.

As a governor of a fairly small state, Bill Clinton used all forums to meet the people of Arkansas in person, as well as through radio and television. His ever-present contact with constituents translated into his frequently using all forums to inform people of his actions, policies, and plans. George W. Bush selectively used similar forums though with many fewer of the free-wheeling exchanges with reporters that Clinton favored early in his presidency. As candidates, Presidents Obama and George H. W. Bush favored set speeches with fewer unscripted interchanges with the press than some of the other recent presidents chose to do. Those habits carried over into their presidencies.

B. PATTERNS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE AMONG INDIVIDUAL PRESIDENTS.

We see in looking at the two 100 day January 20 – April 29th time periods in the first and second years of a president's term that presidents learn how to make the transition from a state to a

national official and also which forums they prefer, where, and how often. The communications challenge of speaking to a national audience is one most presidents make though they do so in their own ways.

All Presidents Take Questions From Reporters. They all recognize they need to respond to reporters queries, even if they would prefer to avoid the press. Part of the implicit bargain presidents make to get the cooperation of news organizations bringing their words and image to the public is to realize they must do so not just on their own terms, but on the terms of the news organizations and their reporters stationed at the White House to cover them and their administrations. The result is fully a third of a president's public appearances where he speaks are ones where he responds to reporters' questions. Four of the six presidents are remarkably similar in their percentage of their appearances where they took questions from reporters. Their percentages of appearances where reporters posed a question or questions was: Obama 31%, George W. Bush 33%, George H. W. Bush 30%, and Reagan 32%. Two presidents had a higher percentage: Trump 42% and Clinton 47%.

Variations in Forums Presidents Use to Respond to Reporters' Queries. Yet within these similar percentages and numbers where president take questions, there are important differences. We can see the continuities and variations among presidents by looking at the press conference patterns of the six presidents. The total press conference numbers for the first 465 days are quite similar among Trump [27], Obama [30] and George W. Bush [30]. Where they vary is on the type of press conferences.

Coming into the George H. W. Bush years, presidents only occasionally gave joint press conferences with officials and foreign leaders. Instead press conferences were held as solo sessions where a president met alone with the press. That has changed. Here President Trump has had fewer solo press conferences than any president since Woodrow Wilson held the first session in March 1913, his first month in office. Only one of Trump's press conferences in his first 465 days was a solo session. In the same time period with varying frequency, most of his successors held them. Obama had 13 solo press conferences, George W. Bush 5, Clinton 18, George H. W. Bush 34, and Reagan 9.

1. RONALD REAGAN: *Nighttime East Room Press Conferences and Weekly Radio Addresses.* During the two 100 day periods, President Reagan developed his communications patterns by establishing his night time East Room presidential press conferences. Prior to March 31st in his second year, Reagan regularly held his solo press conferences in the afternoon and in a room in the Old Executive Office Building. During the second 100 days, he found the East Room as his setting for evening news conferences and using this setting for reporting to the nation. *Weekly Addresses.* From the time when Ronald Reagan began his weekly addresses during his second 100 days in office, he enjoyed the five minute address that he wrote by hand and delivered live on Saturday mornings. Speaking most often from the presidential retreat at Camp David, Reagan highlighted an issue or program that he found important for the public to know. He kept up the practice throughout his presidency with other successors following his pattern, except George H. W. Bush who did not do so until the latter part of his presidency.
2. GEORGE H. W. BUSH: *Joint Press Conferences with a Foreign Leader.* President George H. W. Bush developed the joint news conference where others speak in addition to himself. On March 10 and March 24, 1989, Bush held joint news conferences. The first was with Chief of Staff John Sununu and Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and the second was with congressional leadership. In each case, the officials answered reporters' questions, not just the President. He then had his first joint news conference with a foreign leader with President Francois Mitterrand (France).] He regularly held such sessions when visiting heads of state came to the White House and when he traveled to meet with them in their own countries. His model was received well by visiting dignitaries and by officials in our own government. Bush's successors adopted the model from the time they came into the presidency.

3. **BILL CLINTON: *Balancing a Robust Communications Mix.*** In comparison with other presidents of his time, Clinton held more public events where he spoke. With 924 public events including the speeches, interviews, radio addresses, press conferences, and exchanges with reporters, Clinton led the numbers for the six presidents. They were: Trump 698; Obama 867; George W. Bush 825; Clinton 924; George H. W. Bush 664; Reagan 432.
While he continued to speak in the same forums, during January 20-April 29th in 1994, he altered the frequency he spoke and the balance of his mix of speeches, press conferences, short question and answer sessions, and interviews. The total number of public events where he spoke remained similar, but he gave more speeches that did not include responding to reporters' queries and reduced the number of times [59 in the first 100 days and 29 in the second 100] he took questions without giving a speech. Those instances tend to be on-the-spur-of-the-moment ones where he took questions, such as the times he was jogging around Washington with reporters trailing behind him asking questions. Those sessions became more rare as the second 100 days came and he had a communications team led by David Gergen that sought to organize around a message and advance planning coordinated with legislative and administrative initiatives.
4. **GEORGE W. BUSH: *Continuing Patterns.*** Comparing the two periods, George Bush's patterns are more similar than they are different. His speech numbers are fairly similar as are his weekly address numbers. His short question and answer sessions drop, which is similar to other presidents except for Trump and Bush's father, George H. W. Bush. Overall the percentage dropped of occasions where the presidents spoke and took questions between the two periods. Bush went from 36% to 28% where he took questions while Obama dropped from 36% to 24%, Clinton from 55% to 45%, Reagan from 27% to 26%. Trump increased his events where he responded to reporters' questions from 43% to 47% while George H. W. Bush added press response events rising from 25% to 33%. Bush increased his number of interviews while Trump increased his short question and answer sessions.
5. **BARACK OBAMA: *Featuring Interviews.*** President Obama had more interviews than any president whose records we have as *Public Papers* and since the President's Daily Diary was established. He had about the same number of total press conferences as George W. Bush and Obama, but he had more solo ones. He did not like responding immediately to unfolding events where he didn't have complete information. What he did like were occasions where he could dig down on policy. With his interviews, he was able to do that. For example, early on he spoke on the economy with David Leonhart, New York Times, and had numerous foreign policy interviews, including ones with foreign news organizations. These interviews often lasted between 30 minutes and an hour.
6. **DONALD TRUMP: *Narrowing the Number of Forums, Except for Two.*** His has been a strategy of focusing on those forums and strategies that help him establish a narrative for the day – Tweet in the morning for the opening narrative and expand on it later in the day – and get others to talk about policy. In a sense, it is a loop that has him begin in early morning by tweeting and then build his narrative in answers to reporters' questions at the beginning or end of White House meetings with officials and outside guests, such as corporate executives. He then makes use of Cabinet secretaries and others to discuss policy and to resonate the themes he establishes. To make this strategy work, he has increased his Tweets from 518 in the first 100 day period to 642 in the second. Additionally, he increased the number of exchanges with reporters – remarks and exchanges and exchange only – in the two time periods from 29 in the first period to 42 in the second.
While the Tweets and the exchanges with reporters represent an increase, overall he has had fewer public appearances than he did in the first hundred days. During his first 465 days in office, rather than expanding forums a president uses to connect with the public, he narrowed them. He gave fewer Weekly Addresses, speeches, joint press conferences, interviews, and

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increased only his remarks and exchanges and exchanges with no remarks. These are the forums where he had fewer public appearances.

- Weekly Addresses – 14 in the first 100 days; 5 in the second for a total of 43 in the 465 day period.
- Remarks only – 94 in the first 100 days; 54 in the second for a total of 359 in the same 465 day period.
- Press conferences – 9 in the first 100 days [one solo session]; 5 in the second [no solo sessions] with a total of 27 in the same 465 day period.
- Interviews – 45 in the first 100 days; 8 in the second for a total of 95 in the same 465 day period.

Trump had fewer weekly addresses [43] than his three recent predecessors. President Obama [66], George W. Bush [65], and Clinton [64] rarely missed an opportunity Weekly Address and occasionally gave an additional radio talk. Additionally, Trump had a dramatic drop in the number of interviews he did in the two time periods.

By the end of the second hundred day period, President Trump as well as his predecessors settled on their level of public appearances and the strategies they found useful to reach a public audience. The developments of forums, types of appearances, and their frequency, all demonstrate some of the communications learning that presidents absorb as they shift from being state and regional officials to President of the United States.

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	Addresses to Nation	Joint Session of Congress	Weekly/Radio Addresses	Remarks Only	Remarks & Exchange	Remarks Only + Remarks and Exchanges	Press Conference: Joint	Press Conference: Solo	Exchange Only	Interviews	Tweets ***	ALL REMARKS / SPEECHES*	PRESS INTERCHANGES**	TOTAL PUBLIC EVENTS	PERCENTAGE WITH PRESS
DONALD TRUMP															
First 100 Days: 1/20/ to 4/29/2017	0	2	14	94	25	119	8	1	4	45	518	135	83	193	43.0%
Second 100 Days: 1/20/ to 4/29/2018	0	1	5	54	34	88	5	0	8	8	642	99	55	115	47.8%
Totals 1/20/2017 to 4/29/2018	1	3	43	359	127	486	26	1	43	95	3201	533	292	698	41.8%
BARACK OBAMA															
First 100 Days: 1/20/ to 4/29/2009	0	2	14	122	16	138	6	6	2	46		154	76	214	35.5%
Second 100 Days: 1/20/ to 4/29/2010	0	1	14	104	8	112	1	2	1	25		127	37	156	23.7%
Totals 1/20/2009 to 4/29/2010	0	4	66	525	50	575	17	13	5	187		645	272	867	31.4%
GEORGE W. BUSH															
First 100 Days: 1/20/ to 4/29/2001	0	2	14	121	44	165	3	2	10	19		181	78	215	36.3%
Second 100 Days: 1/20/ to 4/29/2002	1	0	13	123	26	149	10	1	6	10		163	53	190	27.9%
Totals 1/20/2009 to 4/29/2010	5	3	65	482	143	625	25	5	37	60		698	270	825	32.7%
BILL CLINTON															
First 100 Days: 1/20/ to 4/29/1993	1	2	12	72	26	98	9	4	59	9		113	107	194	55.2%
Second 100 Days:1/20/ to 4/29/1994	0	1	14	90	37	127	7	4	29	9		142	86	191	45.0%
Totals 1/20/1993 to 4/29/1994	4	4	64	411	147	558	38	18	174	64		630	441	924	47.7%

	Addresses to Nation	Joint Session of Congress	Weekly/ Radio Addresses	Remarks Only	Remarks & Exchange	Remarks Only + Remarks and Exchanges	Press Conference: Joint	Press Conference: Solo	Exchange Only	Interviews	Tweets ***	ALL REMARKS / SPEECHES*	PRESS INTERCHANGES**	TOTAL PUBLIC EVENTS	PERCENTAGE WITH PRESS
GEORGE H.W. BUSH															
First 100 Days: 1/20/ to 4/29/1989	0	2	0	98	9	107	2	9	2	12		109	34	134	25.4%
Second 100 Days: 1/20/ to 4/29/1990	0	1	0	110	14	124	5	8	5	22		125	54	165	32.7%
Totals 1/20/1989 to 4/29/1990	2	3	0	463	50	468	11	34	31	70		518	196	664	29.5%
RONALD REAGAN															
First 100 Days: 1/20/ to 4/29/1981	1	3	0	57	1	58	0	2	4	16		62	23	84	27.4%
Second 100 Days: 1/20/ to 4/29/1982	0	1	4	71	3	74	0	2	9	13		79	27	103	26.2%
Totals 1/20/1981 to 4/29/1982	4	4	4	280	17	297	0	9	36	78		309	140	432	32.4%