

# **Barack Obama's First Six Months of International and Domestic Presidential Travel in Historical Context**

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With countless demands upon a president, the strategic allocation of his, and someday her, time, which is arguably his scarcest resource, can indicate a great deal about a president's priorities. This brief study analyzes how President Barack Obama's international and domestic travel during his first six calendar months in office compare to his five immediate predecessors in the Oval Office.<sup>1</sup>

## International Travel

### *When*

In his first six months as president, President Obama devoted far more time to traveling internationally than did any of the past five presidents, as depicted in Table 1. His 18 days spent abroad are more than the combined totals of Presidents Jimmy Carter (six days), Ronald Reagan (two days),<sup>2</sup> and Bill Clinton (two days), and far outpace both George H.W. Bush (12 days) and George W. Bush (nine days). President Obama's 18 days out of the country spanned four different trips, as compared to just one international journey apiece for Carter, Reagan, and Clinton, and three for both the first and second Presidents Bush.

President Obama's international trips in his first six months in office were longer, on average, than all but one of his recent predecessors. Carter's one trip was a six-day journey, while Obama's trips have lasted an average of 4.5 days. George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush averaged four- and three-day trips, respectively, while the only international trips for Reagan and Clinton lasted just two days.

President Obama made his first trip abroad, a one-day visit to Canada, on February 19. Only two of the previous five presidents journeyed to another country this early in their term – George H.W. Bush's first such trip was on February 10, and George W. Bush's was on February 16. Presidents Carter, Reagan, and Clinton didn't leave the United States until May 5, March 10, and April 3 of their respective first years in office.

**Table 1: Days of International Presidential Travel, First Six Months of Six Presidencies**

Month	Carter 1977	Reagan 1981	GHW Bush 1989	Clinton 1993	GW Bush 2001	Obama 2009
January	0	0	0	0	0	0
February	0	0	5	0	1	1
March	0	2	0	0	0	1
April	0	0	0	2	3	11
May	6	0	6	0	0	0
June	0	0	1	0	5	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>18</b>

Source: Data compiled by the author from the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For in-depth analysis of international and domestic presidential travel from 1977 through 2005, see Brendan J. Doherty, "The President on the Road: International and Domestic Travel, 1977-2005," White House Transition Project, available at <http://whitehousetransitionproject.org/resources/briefing/WHTP-2009-05-Travel.pdf> (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Reagan's low totals for both international and domestic travel during his first six months as president are in large part a function of his lengthy recovery from being shot by a would-be assassin in late March 1981.

<sup>3</sup> The *Public Papers of the Presidents* are available via many sources, including in printed volumes and online through the Government Printing Office, the American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara, various presidential libraries, and the White House web site.

*Where and For What*

In choosing Canada as his first international destination, President Obama followed in the footsteps of three of the past four presidents of the United States, as Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton all made their first trip abroad to our neighbor to the north. Carter’s first international destination was England, while George W. Bush, the former Texas governor, chose Mexico for his first international visit. This decision both indicated his desire to build stronger ties with Mexico and spurred a minor outcry in Ottawa, where officials had become accustomed to Canada hosting a U.S. president’s first trip abroad as a sign of the close ties between the two countries.

Table 2 illustrates that President Obama has visited more countries than any of the five presidents who preceded him during the first six months in office. Obama has made 13 trips to 11 countries, including two trips apiece to Germany and France. George H.W. Bush visited nine countries and George W. Bush seven countries in their first six months, while Carter visited two countries, and Reagan and Clinton each visited just one.

**Table 2: Countries Visited, Chronological Order, First Six Months of Six Presidencies**

Carter 1977	Reagan 1981	GHW Bush 1989	Clinton 1993	GW Bush 2001	Obama 2009
England	Canada	Canada	Canada	Mexico	Canada
Switzerland		Japan		Canada	England
		China		Spain	France
		South Korea		Belgium	Germany
		Italy		Sweden	Czech Republic
		Vatican City		Poland	Turkey
		Belgium		Slovenia	Iraq
		Germany			Mexico
		England			Trinidad and Tobago
					Saudi Arabia
					Egypt
					Germany
					France

Source: Data compiled by the author from the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*

Like most of his predecessors, Obama’s travels have been predominantly to European countries, though he has visited a wider range of regions of the world than the other presidents in this study. Six of his 13 stops have been in Europe – two apiece in France and Germany, as well as trips to England and the Czech Republic. Unlike his predecessors in this study, he has visited four countries in the Middle East – Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt – during his first six months in office. In the western hemisphere, he has visited both Canada and Mexico, as well as Trinidad and Tobago. Both of Carter’s visits abroad were to European countries, as were five stops for each President Bush. Of the presidents in this study, only George H.W. Bush journeyed to Asia at the beginning of his term, and only George W. Bush and Obama visited both Canada and Mexico in their first six months in office.

The nature of Obama’s visits abroad mirror those of his predecessors, albeit in a more expansive manner. Seven of Obama’s 13 stops were bilateral visits with the head of state of another country, as were 15 of the 20 journeys made by the combined five other presidents examined in this study. Obama’s six other visits revolved around multilateral gatherings – a G-20 summit, a meeting of the European Union, stops in two

different countries for a NATO summit, a Summit of the Americas, and the commemoration of the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day. Similar multilateral gatherings account for the five other visits abroad by the first five presidents in this study.

### Domestic Travel

#### *When*

In contrast to, and perhaps in part because of, his record-setting pace of international travel, President Obama has not stood out from his predecessors in the volume of his domestic travel. Each of the five other presidents in this study spent substantially more time traveling domestically than abroad during their first six months in office. However, in addition to spending 18 days abroad, Obama held domestic public events outside of Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia on 19 days during his first six calendar months as president, as displayed in Table 3.<sup>4</sup> This total puts him far behind George W. Bush, who held events outside of the DC area on 40 days during his first six months, and slightly behind George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, who held such events on 24 and 21 days, respectively. There has been a marked increase in early domestic travel over time, as Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan were far less active in this regard than their successors.

**Table 3: Days Holding Presidential Domestic Non-DC Area Public Events, First Six Months of Six Presidencies**

Month	Carter 1977	Reagan 1981	GHW Bush 1989	Clinton 1993	GW Bush 2001	Obama 2009
January	1	0	0	0	0	0
February	0	1	4	5	7	6
March	2	1	3	2	11	3
April	1	0	7	4	8	2
May	5	2	5	8	9	6
June	1	3	5	2	5	2
Total	10	7	24	21	40	19

Source: Data compiled by the author from the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*

With respect to timing, President Obama followed a similar path as did Presidents George H.W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush. He did not travel domestically during his first 11 days in office in January, but then made his first such trip in early February, spending six days on the road outside of DC, Maryland, and Virginia that month. Aside

<sup>4</sup> Data on domestic presidential travel reflect the number of full or partial days the president held public events while outside of the Washington, DC area. Because a large number of public presidential events occur in the Washington, DC metropolitan area only a few miles from the White House as part of the president's regular activities and are not comparable to other types of presidential travel, events in Maryland and Virginia are not included. A presidential event held at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland or at the Pentagon in Virginia is not a representative example of a president traveling to the states. Days spent at presidential second homes in Chicago, IL, Crawford, TX, or similar locations are not included in these counts. It is worth noting that while Reagan and both Bushes used their second home as a western or northeastern White House, holding many official events there, Carter, Clinton, and Obama did not. Indeed, while Obama traveled to Chicago several times in his first six months in office, all but one such journey was for official business at a site other than his home there.

from January, Obama spent the least time traveling domestically in April and June, when he made his two long international journeys. Focusing on the big picture, the four most recent presidents traveled more in their first year than the first two presidents in this study, and they undertook more expansive travel agendas earlier in the year.

*Where and For What*

President Obama has held 24 public events in 14 different states outside of Washington, DC, Maryland, and Virginia, on 19 different days, an average of 1.26 events per day. Additionally, he has held six events in Virginia – five in the near suburbs of Washington, DC, and an additional event in Williamsburg – as well as one event in Annapolis, Maryland, and numerous events in the District of Columbia itself. Obama has held events in five states in the West (Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico), six states in the Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin), one state in the Northeast (New York),<sup>5</sup> and two states in the Southeast (Florida and North Carolina). As has been widely noted in the media, nine of these states were considered politically competitive “battleground” states in the 2008 presidential election. This apparent targeting of key electoral states follows in the footsteps of several of his predecessors.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 4: Type of Presidential Domestic Non-DC Area Public Event, First Six Months of Obama's Presidency**

Type of Event	Number of Events
Town hall meeting	7
Speech - policy issue	6
Fundraiser	4
Speech - university commencement	2
Speech at a military base	2
Bill signing	1
Date with the First Lady	1
Speech - ceremonial occasion	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>

Source: Data compiled by the author from the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*

The most common type of event held by President Obama, as illustrated in Table 4, has been the town hall meeting. These events are often focused around a certain policy issue, as have been the six events Obama has held in which he has given a speech focused on a certain policy area. Most of these events have revolved around various elements of the current economic crisis – unemployment, the housing industry, the recently enacted stimulus package, and more. Four of the president’s non-DC area events have been political fundraisers for his party allies. Obama has given two speeches apiece at military bases (Camp Lejeune in North Carolina and Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada) and at university commencement ceremonies (Arizona State University and Notre Dame, in

<sup>5</sup> While President Obama did not hold an official public event in New York, his much publicized date night trip there with First Lady Michelle Obama received so much attention that it deserves to be included in this study of the president’s public activities.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the targeting of key electoral states, see Brendan J. Doherty, “The Politics of the Permanent Campaign: Presidential Travel and the Electoral College, 1977-2004.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 37. No. 4 (2007), pp. 749-773.

Indiana, in addition to the United States Naval Academy in Maryland). Finally, Obama signed one major bill into law outside of Washington, gave a speech on the occasion of Abraham Lincoln's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, and traveled to New York City with the First Lady on a highly publicized date night.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Countless important priorities compete for a president's time. When, where, and for what a president chooses to travel can reveal a great deal about a president's priorities and goals. Examination of the first six months of President Barack Obama's international and domestic travel reveals an active chief executive. His record-setting pace of travel abroad reflects the many international challenges facing the United States at the beginning of his administration. And his domestic travel, while lower in volume than that of some of his predecessors, paints a picture of a president who is aggressively taking his message directly to the people across the country.