

President Obama Meets the Press: Continuity and Change in the Presidential - Press Relationship

Martha Joynt Kumar

Director, White House Transition Project

Towson University

An analysis of presidential interchanges with reporters during their first seven months in office gives us a good view of what patterns are similar among chief executives and where flexibility lies in one of a president's significant relationships. By looking at and comparing the interchanges with reporters Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton had with those of President Obama, we see the continuing demand reporters have for responses from presidents and the choices chief executives make in answering reporters' queries. The three presidents demonstrate a different mix in their meetings with reporters, but all of them use the basic forums observed by their predecessors. Each chief executive sought to combine the venues in a manner most suited to his personality, his strengths, and his message.

In meeting the press, presidents have three choices of venues for their meetings with the press: presidential news conferences – solo and joint sessions; short question and answer sessions with reporters; and interviews with individuals and groups of reporters. Press conferences are formal sessions where the president takes questions by himself or joined by one or more people to respond to questions with the president.

The second type of interchange with reporters is the short question and answer session the president holds with a pool of reporters representing the press corps as a whole. These are sessions where the president will take two or three questions usually focused on the news of the day. The final type of session for reporters to question presidents are interviews with one or a group of reporters. These are generally longer form sessions, sometimes lasting up to an hour.

Presidents Meet the Press in Three Forums - First Seven Months*

President	Total Press Conferences	Solo	Joint	Short Question and Answer Sessions	Interviews	Total Sessions
Barack Obama	22	9	13	34	114	170
George W. Bush	14	3	11	91	37	142
Bill Clinton	23	8	15	176	41	240

* The press conference and short question and answer information in these charts comes from the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents for Presidents Bush and Clinton, and for President Obama from the Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents. All are produced by the National Archives and Records Administration; the Daily Compilation has replaced as the Weekly Compilation as of the Obama administration. Information from both are used as the basis of *The Public Papers of the President of the United States*. The Daily Compilation is now only published online: <http://fdsys.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/collection.action;jsessionid=6e9b7243237efaa1465a6c4d9c811a25a35871f2b748aa23a4694eaab44f3671.e38Kb3eQa30NaOOLbhySbh0KaNb0?collectionCode=CPD&browsePath=2009&isCollap>. I use the National Archives designation of what is a press conference and then, according to my criteria, divide them into solo and joint sessions. The short question and answer sessions are designated by the National Archives in their publications as "Exchanges with Reporters." With some exceptions, control over interview transcripts lies with news organizations. Some organizations publicly release theirs and some do not. The White House does release some interviews, such as ones with foreign journalists and roundtables with groups of reporters. Television and radio interviews almost always become available either through the White House or the news organization. The interview figures come from a group of sources including the Weekly and Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents, interview transcripts made publicly available in print and online, and internal documents from the administrations.

Press Conferences. Since they first began in March 1913, at the beginning of the Woodrow Wilson administration, news conferences have been the venue presidents have consistently used to meet reporters. Though the sessions vary in their frequency and the ground rules controlling them, every president from Woodrow Wilson forward has held them. The conferences come in two varieties, solo and joint sessions. Solo press conferences are ones where the president alone responds to reporters queries.

Joint sessions are ones where the president responds to questions with another official, most often a visiting foreign leader. Beginning in President George H. W. Bush's years in office, these have become the most popular form of presidential press conference. With statements at the beginning about their joint meeting, both leaders respond to a limited number of questions from White House reporters and those from the country of the visiting foreign leader.

The solo press conference is the most valued type of session with reporters because the president stands alone to answer their queries. While there are differences in the format of solo sessions, they have been on the record since 1953, President Eisenhower's first year in office. The sessions usually last at least a half hour and are open to reporters covering the president and the White House. The number for the three presidents are fairly similar though President Bush held fewer solo sessions. In their first seven months in office, President Obama had 22 press conferences, 9 solo and 13 joint while President Bush held 14, 3 solo and 11 joint. President Clinton had 23 such sessions with 8 of them solo sessions and 15 joint. In the table below, one can see the press conference habits of presidents since the beginning of the Eisenhower administration when in his first year he made press conferences an on-the-record event. The figures for each president include their press conferences totals broken down for these time periods: number of years in office, first term, and at seven months. The press conferences are listed by solo and joint sessions as well as by nighttime ones in the White House East Room and elsewhere in the United States.

Solo and Joint Press Conferences 1953-2009*

President	Total	Solo	Joint	Joint %	Nighttime East Room **	Nighttime in U.S. any location
Eisenhower 1-20-1953 to 1-20-1961	193	192	1	0.5	0	0
Eisenhower First Term 1-20-1953 to 1-20-1957	99	98	1	1.0	0	0
Eisenhower – Seven Months	14	14	0	0	0	0
Kennedy 1-20-61 to 11-22-63	65	65	0	0	0	6 nighttime ones, 5 at 6:00 pm; 1 at 7:00 pm
Kennedy- Seven Months	15	15	0	0	0	3 [2 at 6:00 pm; 1 at 7:00 pm]
Johnson 11-22-1963 to 1-20-1969	135***	118	16	11.9	0	6 [3 7:00-10; 3 6:45]
1963-1965 11-22-63 to 1-20-1965	36	35	1	2.8	0	1
Johnson – Seven Months	19	18	1	5.3	0	0
Richard Nixon 1-20-1969 to 8-9-1974	39	39	0	0	13****	14
Nixon First Term 1-20-1969 to 1-20-1973	30	30	0	0	10	11
Nixon – Seven Months	6	6	0	0	2	2
Gerald Ford 8-9-74 to 1-20-77	40	39	1	2.5	4	12
Ford – Seven Months	10	9	1	10.0	1	3
Jimmy Carter 1-20-77 to 1-20-81	59	59	0	0	5	8
Carter - Seven Months	13	13	0	0	0	0
Ronald Reagan 1-20-1981 to 1-20-1989	46	46	0	0	23	33
Reagan First Term 1-20-81 to 1-20-85	27	27	0	0	18	19
Reagan - Seven Months	3	3	0	0	0	0
G. H. W. Bush 1-20-89 to 1-20-93	143	84	59	41.3	2	2
Bush - Seven Months	20	16	4	20.0	1	1
Bill Clinton 1-20-1993 to 1-20-2001	155	51	104	67.1	4	4
Clinton First Term 1-20-1993 to 1-20-1997	133	44	89	66.9	4	4
Clinton - Seven Months	23	8	15	65.2	1	1
George W. Bush 1-20-2001 to 1-20-2009	208	50	158	76.0	4	4
Bush First Term 1-20-2001 to 1-20-2005	89	17	72	80.9	3	3
Bush - Seven Months	14	3	11	78.6	0	0
Barack Obama - Seven Months	22	9	13	59.1	4	4

* The first row for each president is the number of press conferences a president held in his presidency.

The second row is the total for the first term.

The third row is the first 213 days into their presidency, which, for most presidents, brings a president up August 20.

** Nighttime East Room press conferences did not begin until Richard Nixon inaugurated them. Eisenhower had no East Room press conferences and no nighttime ones. Kennedy had no East Room ones but he did have 6 evening ones, 5 at 6:00 pm and 1 at 7:00 pm. President Johnson used the East Room for 15 press conferences but none at night. He had 6 evening ones in other locations with a starting time of 6:00 pm up to 7:10 pm but none later. Nixon brought all of that together in the White House East Room in prime television viewing time, most often after 8:00 pm.

*** No transcript 8-19-65, thus cannot determine Solo and Joint for it

**** Counting one session starting at 6:30. All other nighttime sessions begin 7:00 or later

President Obama had an audience for several of his solo press conferences that no other president has had in their first seven months in office. He used four of his solo sessions to address the nation in prime television viewing time from the East Room of the White House. Just how unusual his sessions were can be seen in looking at the nighttime news conferences for ten most recent presidents. With high interest in President Obama and his policy plans, the networks gave him an hour for these four news conferences as well as for his economic speech to Congress. The president and his team place special value on those seven or so minutes at the beginning of the news conference where the chief executive can speak directly to a national audience on issues and subjects important to him. Measured by the Nielsen ratings of viewers watching the sessions, his four news conferences had large audiences for evening news events. His February 9 session had 49.4 million viewers, his March 24 one had 40.4, the April 29 session had 28.8, and his July 22 one 24.7 million viewers.¹ All of these sessions represented opportunities for the president to bring a national audience together to listen to his views on what he considers important issues.

Short Question and Answer Sessions. Short question and answer sessions are the most numerous sessions in most administrations because they are short, quick, and take little preparation. These are ones that take place mostly in the Oval Office, the Roosevelt Room, the Cabinet Room, and the Diplomatic Room where space is at a premium and a pool of reporters represent the whole of the press corps. Usually scheduled with less than a day's advance notice, the president will call on two or three reporters, most often ones from the wire services. These short sessions are essentially reactive ones where the chief executive addresses the hot news issues of the day rather than discusses details of the initiatives he wants to highlight. They are sessions where reporters rarely get follow-up questions.

While the three recent presidents held short question and answer sessions with reporters, there are great differences between them in how they used the brief queries. President Clinton held 176 of them in his first seven months in office while President Bush had 91 and President Obama 34. President Clinton was very available to reporters in his early days in office responding to queries when he went jogging around

Washington as well as answering queries in more traditional White House venues. Early in his first term, his communications was focused on daily responses rather than fitting in sessions with reporters as part of long-range plans. President Bush was willing to respond to reporters' queries every day or two in his first seven months in office. President Obama, however, shied away from such sessions.

For President Obama, short question and answer sessions are not a good forum for explaining his policies at the length he prefers. This venue does not lend itself to long explanations. Answers given in short sessions can lead to more questions for a president and his team. When he was asked about his view of whether there should be a torture commission as a follow-up on his release of torture memoranda from the Bush administration, President Obama had a 718 word answer that was the source of many questions for Press Secretary Robert Gibbs in his briefings the following two weeks.² When asked several days in a row to discuss further the president's position on Congress creating a torture commission, Gibbs said that White House officials were not dealing in hypotheticals. Major Garrett of Fox News pointed out that the president had dealt with a hypothetical situation. Gibbs responded: "We'll have -- trust me, we'll have no more of that for the remainder of this administration."³ President Obama did not hold many of these short question and answer sessions before or after this particular one. There are other choices when he wants to discuss a current issue.

Typically these sessions take place on the White House compound with few of them held outside Washington or outside the United States when the president is traveling. Instead, the sessions are routine responses to what is happening on a daily basis at the White House and take place there. Of President Clinton's 176 sessions, 151 were held on the White House compound while President Bush had 56 of his 91 in the White House complex and another 19 in the U.S. but outside of Washington, mostly in or near his home in Crawford, Texas. President Obama had 30 of his 34 sessions at the White House.

Interviews. Interviews are generally longer form sessions with reporters where presidents can speak at length about particular topics and to target audiences they wish to reach. From the beginning of his administration, President Obama has put his

emphasis on interviews where he can talk at length on subjects he is interested in having a public debate. President Obama's 114 interviews in seven months contrast with those of Presidents Clinton and Bush, both of whom did not put the same emphasis on long form sessions with reporters. President Clinton had 41 interviews during his first seven months in office while George Bush had 37.

President Obama favors interviews because he can target particular topics with specific audiences in mind, such as speaking to the Latino and black communities, and address topics of interest to him at a particular point in his presidency. His first White House interview, for example, was with Hisham Melhem of Al Arabiya and took place less than a week after Obama took office.⁴ He wanted to send a message to the Islamic world that he wanted to establish a different relationship than was the case in earlier administrations. In addition, he held interviews that were topic specific as was his economic discussion with David Leonhardt of the *New York Times*.⁵ President Obama would rather avoid being at the mercy of today's issues and spend time talking about what he wants to discuss at a length he prefers. The nature of the coverage they receive as a result of interviews with the president is an important aspect of why White House staff recommend interviews.

The types of interviews President Obama holds favor a national audience and aim at using old rather than new media, particularly television and print. In his first and second evening press conferences, President Obama called on a reporter each for new media online organizations Politico and the Huffington Post. Yet in his first seven months in office, he did not have an interview with either news organization. He has left to staff the responsibility for keeping up with the news needs of online organizations. In fact, the only exclusively online news organization he did an interview with was AllAfrica.com, an organization he used to reach people in several African countries prior to his July trip there.

Presidential Interviews: Types of News Organizations

President	Television	Radio	Print	Mixed (more than one medium)	Total
Barack Obama	66	7	36	5	114
George W. Bush	16	0	21	0	37
Bill Clinton	6	18	17	0	41

President Obama’s active television interview schedule represents a way for him to reach a national audience to explain his plans and thinking on the economy as well as foreign policy. Except for a set of six interviews with local television stations in Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana, President Obama’s television interviews have been with national news organizations. Still, there are variations in the kinds of television appearances he has made with interviews on evening major network news programs, morning shows, as well as cable news programs, and special sessions, such as his “60 Minutes” interview, the ABC evening health care session, and NBC’s “A Day in the Life of the White House.” When he speaks to print organizations he often does so in a group setting. He has held six roundtables with regional reporters and one each with foreign journalists, energy reporters, Hispanic news organizations, African-American reporters, military news organizations, and reporters for Catholic news organizations.

Presidential Interviews : Audience of News Organizations

President	National	Regional/ Local	Foreign	Specialty	Mixed	Total
Barack Obama	68	16	10	18	2	114
George W. Bush	26	2	8	1	0	37
Bill Clinton	11	27	3	0	0	41

With an aggressive policy agenda, President Obama used interviews to sell his programs to national audiences, especially television ones. He also appealed to particular audiences, such as Latinos. He had seven interviews with Latino individuals

and groups. As was the case with his predecessors, his interviews with foreign reporters were generally to preview a trip he was about to take so that citizens there would know what he hoped for in coming to their country.

As much as those running for the office call for change, in reality presidents adopt many of the same practices favored by earlier chief executives. The routines of governing and the routes to success remain similar no matter who is president. In his first 213 days, President Obama followed the pattern of his predecessors in meeting with reporters to respond to their queries. He also followed a presidential pattern in choosing which venues favored his message and how he prefers to deliver it. It is important to remember, though, that his sessions with reporters are only one part of the public presentation of him and his ideas. While he regularly appears in settings with reporters, President Obama is on television and in print more frequently for his addresses and remarks in Washington, around the country, and abroad. There he follows a pattern of recent presidents appearing often and usually carried live by cable networks. In their first seven months in office, the three presidents had remarkably similar totals for their remarks. President Obama had 323, President Bush 333, and 290 for President Clinton. If members of the public watch television, it is difficult for them not to see the president almost every day in a variety of forums with or without reporters posing questions. That is a pattern similar to his recent predecessors.

¹ <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/nielsen-news/obama-prime-time-health-care-press-conference>

² Remarks Following a Meeting With King Abdullah II of Jordan and an Exchange With Reporters April 21, 2009. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=86029&st=&st1=>

³ Press Briefing by Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, April 23, 2009, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=86046&st=&st1=>.

⁴ January 26th 2009. <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/January/20090127161320xjsnommis0.705578.html>

⁵ David Leonhardt, "After the Great Recession," *New York Times*, April 28, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/03/magazine/03Obama-t.html?_r=1