



**THE WHITE HOUSE
TRANSITION PROJECT**
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RICE UNIVERSITY'S
BAKER INSTITUTE
FOR PUBLIC POLICY

SMOOTHING THE PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF DEMOCRATIC POWER

Report 2017—45

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

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

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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.

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Even at the 50 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.

1. **PRESIDENTIAL INTERCHANGES WITH REPORTERS AS A PERMANENT ASPECT OF THE PRESIDENCY.** No matter whether they like news organizations and their reporters, 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 six recent presidents have complained about their press coverage, but all have answered reporters' questions as an aspect of their official obligations.
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. Joint sessions have the

added benefit of answering questions from a half dozen reporters rather than three times that number in an extended full press conference session.

3. **PRESIDENTIAL INTERVIEWS CONTINUE TO OUTPACE PRESS CONFERENCES.** As President George H. W. Bush's successors followed his joint press conference example, at this early point President Trump is maintaining the interview patterns developed by President Obama. With people no longer watching the evening news as they once did, presidents have gradually reduced their solo press conferences in favor of interviews with a variety of local and specialized interviews where the President and his staff can target particular audiences. President Obama, for example, focused on local interviews (25% for Obama to George W. Bush's 9%) and specialty audiences (23% for Obama and 9% for Bush) 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. For his part, President George W. Bush, had two wars to deal with and much travel abroad. He used interviews with foreign audiences (31% to Obama's 4%) to support his goals.
4. **SHORT QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSIONS CONTINUE AS A FILL-IN BETWEEN PRESS CONFERENCES.** Press conferences remain a basic and important forum for presidents to meet with reporters. All presidents from Woodrow Wilson forward have conducted them, but the traditional solo press conferences are less frequent than they were from Wilson through Harry Truman. During those years, press conferences were presumed to be weekly or twice weekly off-the-record ones. Once they went on-the-record early in President Eisenhower tenure, the sessions 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 most recent six presidents demonstrate a difference in their taste for such sessions. President Obama is the President who least liked the session where a President is called on to respond at the moment to unfolding events. He held four of them. President Trump has been more willing to use such sessions (7), though President George W. Bush (29) and Clinton (47) were aggressive in their use of short question-and-answer sessions in their first 50 days.
5. **DO EARLY PATTERNS FORESHADOW TRENDS IN PRESIDENTIAL PRESS INTERCHANGES ?** In important ways, early 50 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 fifty day numbers from the recent high point of 90 speeches and remarks of President George W. Bush to the recent 51 of President Trump with President Obama in between at 62. 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.

President Obama supplemented his speeches with interviews as his 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.

SIX PRESIDENTS AND THEIR INTERCHANGES WITH REPORTERS THROUGH MARCH 10, 2017 50 DAYS INTO THE ADMINISTRATION¹

Martha Joynt Kumar

- Press conferences, January 20, 2017 – March 10, 2017: 5 [1 Solo and 4 Joint]
- Short question-and-answer sessions, January 20th, 2001- March 10, 2017: 7
- Interviews, January 20, 2017 – March 10, 2017: 17
- Addresses and remarks: 51

PRESS CONFERENCES

President Donald Trump: Press Conferences

January 20 2017 – March 10 2017: 5 [1Solo; 4 Joint]

White House Solo: 1

Nighttime East Room: 0

President Barack Obama: Press Conferences

January 20 2009 – March 10 2009: 2 [1 Solo, 1 Joint]

White House Solo: 1

Nighttime East Room: 1 [February 9 2009]

President George W. Bush: Press Conferences

January 20 2001 – March 10 2001: 3 [1 Solo; 2 Joint]

White House Solo: 1

Nighttime East Room: 0

President Bill Clinton: Press Conferences

January 20 1993 – March 10 1993: 5 [1 Solo; 4 Joint]

White House Solo: 1

Nighttime East Room: 0

President George H. W. Bush: Press Conferences

January 20 1989 – March 10 1993: 7 [7 Solo; 0 Joint]

White House Solo: 4

Nighttime East Room: 0

President Ronald Reagan: Press Conferences

January 20 1981 – March 10 1981: 2 [2 Solo; 0 Joint]

White House Solo: 2

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 – March 10 2017: 7

President Barack Obama: Short question and answer sessions

January 20 2009 – March 10 2009: 4

President George W. Bush: Short question and answer sessions

January 20 2001 – March 10 2001: 29

President Bill Clinton: Short question and answer sessions

January 20 1993 – March 10 1993: 47

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

January 20 1989 – March 10 1989: 5

President Ronald Reagan: Short question and answer sessions

January 20 1981 – March 10 1981: 3

INTERVIEWS

President Donald Trump: Interviews

January 20 2017 – March 10 2017: 17

President Barack Obama: Interviews

January 20 2009 – March 10 2009: 25

President George W. Bush: Interviews

January 20 2001 – March 10 2001: 5

President Bill Clinton: Interviews

January 20 1993 – March 10 1993: 3

President George H. W. Bush: Interviews

January 20 1989 – March 10 1989: 6

President Ronald Reagan: Interview

January 20 1989 – March 10 1981: 11

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

January 20 2017 – March 10 2017: 51 [2 Address Nation / Joint Session; 7 Weekly Address; 42 Remarks]

President Barack Obama: Addresses and remarks

January 20 2017 – March 10 2017: 62 [2 Address Nation / Joint Session; 7 Weekly Address; 53 Remarks]

President George W. Bush: Addresses and remarks

January 20 2017 – March 10 2017: 90 [2 Address Nation / Joint Session; 7 Weekly Address; 81 Remarks]

President Bill Clinton: Addresses and remarks

January 20 1993 – March 10 1993: 58 [3 Address Nation / Joint Session; 5 Weekly Address; 50 Remarks]

President George H. W. Bush: Addresses and remarks

January 20 1989 – March 10 1989: 49 [2 Address Nation / Joint Session; 0 Weekly Address; 47 Remarks]

President Ronald Reagan: Addresses and remarks

January 20 1989 – March 10 1981: 43 [3 Address Nation / Joint Session; 0 Weekly Address; 40 Remarks]

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. 3/21/17 2:29 PM