

Presidential Interchanges with Reporters: The Practices of Six Presidents in their First Nine Months in Office

Martha Joynt Kumar
Director, White House Transition Project

What follows are some basic points about the relationship between the President and the press as seen through the interchanges presidents have with reporters who question them during the period from January 20 – October 20. The figures for Presidents Reagan through Trump are included following this summary of their choices of the frequency and forums where they met reporters and answered their questions.

The Importance and the Frequency of the Three Types of Presidential – Press Exchanges

- Press interchange venues. All recent presidents met with reporters in three venues: press conferences (Joint or Solo); short question and answer sessions; interviews. There are significant differences among them, though, over which of the three forums they favored.
- Press interchanges represent over one-third of events where a President speaks. As different as the last three presidents have been from the perspective of party, goals, and temperament, there is a similarity in the percentage of their spoken words that have been in sessions with reporters. Taking their speeches, addresses, remarks, and adding in the exchanges with reporters, Presidents Trump, Obama, and George W. Bush all had a little over one-third of their public utterances as ones where these presidents responded to queries from reporters in the early nine-month period. Their comparative figures are: Trump 40%, Obama, 34%, and George W. Bush 35%. President Clinton was the outlier with 51% of his events ones where he responded to questions while the numbers for Presidents George H.W. Bush and Reagan were 27% and 25%.
- Why develop alternatives to Solo press conferences? While presidents following Woodrow Wilson met regularly alone with reporters in press conferences on an off-the-record basis, they developed alternative sessions once the sessions went “on the record” with Eisenhower. When the sessions were off-the-record for Presidents Wilson through Truman, the risk of presidential mistakes were minimal. That changed when those sessions went on the record and were televised. Gradually, presidents developed less risky alternative venues to meet with reporters.

Presidential Press Conferences and the Fading Solo Sessions

- Whether Solo or Joint sessions, recent presidents held fewer press conferences than their predecessors. The balance between the three types of press interchanges has sharply shifted since the 1950s when the only category of exchanges was Solo press conferences where President Eisenhower stood alone answering questions. Whether Joint or Solo, press conferences now make up a small percentage of the events with reporters. Except for George H. W. Bush, all recent presidents held comparatively few press conferences. The numbers for press conferences as a percentage of all interchanges with the press are: Trump 10%; Obama 12%; George W. Bush 9%; Clinton 10%; Reagan 7%. For George H. W. Bush, who began the practice of holding joint sessions with foreign leaders, 25% of his sessions were press conferences.
- The vanishing Solo press conference. Solo press conferences where a President answers questions for usually from a half hour to an hour, represent the type of exchange least likely to occur, but most sought by reporters. President Trump had one such session out of the total number of 181 interchanges he has had with reporters. His recent predecessors also had modest numbers for Solo sessions as a part of their total numbers of press conferences, short question

and answer sessions, and interviews. The numbers for Solo sessions and their total interchanges for the six presidents are: Trump 1/181; Obama 10/192; George W. Bush 4/181; Clinton 10/ 289; George H. W. Bush 20/101; Reagan 4/58.

- Joint press conferences. President George H. W. Bush developed the joint news conference with foreign leaders, and sometimes officials of our government, as a regular aspect of presidential exchanges with reporters. The Joint sessions with foreign leaders are important for putting visiting officials on the record discussing their meetings with the presidents with whom they met as well as provides presidents with an opportunity to call on a reduced number of reporters – usually two each for the U.S. and visiting sides - than is true in a Solo session where more than a dozen reporters pose questions. The numbers of Joint sessions as part of their overall interchanges with reporters follow with the three figures representing, first, total Joint sessions for the period through October 20th; second, total press conferences during that time; third, all interchanges with reporters in this period. Trump 17/18/181; Obama 13/23/192; George W. Bush 13/17/181; Clinton 20/30/289; George H. W. Bush 5/25/101; Reagan 0/4/58.

Short Question-and-Answer Sessions and Interviews

- While presidents avoid Solo press conferences, some have welcomed short question-and-answer sessions where they take a question or two at the beginning / end of a meeting or when they are leaving or arriving by helicopter on the South Lawn of the White House. Additionally, with the proliferation of numbers and types of media, presidents have increased the number of interviews they do with media and news organizations of their choosing.
- Personal style and short question-and-answer sessions. Recent presidents have either embraced or eschewed these sessions. President Obama did not frequently choose to respond to reporters' queries at the top of meetings or in any other circumstance where he might be put in a position of giving a response to a question when he felt he did not have sufficient information about the situation. As a result, he held only 39 such sessions in his first nine months in office. By contrast, President Clinton held 209 of them in the same period. The other four presidents generally fell in between those numbers: Trump 90; George W. Bush 122; George H. W. Bush 38. Reagan, recovering from a bullet wound, held 21. These sessions are important for presidents who want to comment on unfolding events, actions, and problems. With cable news channels an important part of presidential life beginning in 1996 when Fox and MSNBC joined CNN at the White House, presidents are assured their words will have wide and immediate coverage and get to those they want to reach.
- Over time, presidents develop their practices of responding to reporters, which sometimes leads them to change their preferred venues. While President Trump did a considerable number of interviews in the spring, he has recently shown a taste for short question and answer sessions. In September, for example, President Trump had 23 short Q&As while he had only two interviews that I could find. In April, though, he only had 8 exchanges with reporters while sitting for 17 interviews. President Obama, however, stayed with his preference for interviews from the beginning to the end of his administration. Additionally, he never changed his distaste for short question and answer sessions.

A basic difference between the two types of sessions involves the distinction of who questions the President. While a President can choose who he wants to do interviews and where and when they will take place, the short question and answer sessions depend on the rotating pool of reporters to pose the questions. The White House does not control the reporters who are in the pool. The organizations in the pool is something worked out between the White House and the

White House Correspondents Association. The news organizations in the pool are ones that regularly cover the President and have a daily presence in the White House as well as a demonstrated need to be there. While the White House press staff can choose whether an event will have pool coverage, staff cannot decide who is in that pool and will pose the questions.

- Interviews. Both Presidents Trump and Obama had more interviews through October 20th of their first year than did their predecessors. Their numbers: Trump 74; Obama 130; George W. Bush 42; Clinton 50; George H. W. Bush 38; Reagan 33. As with short question-and-answer sessions, interviews have the advantage for a President of his choosing the place, time, and reporters to talk to. With a growth in the numbers, platforms, and types of news organizations, presidents can use interviews to target audiences in a way they could not during the Reagan years when interviews were most often with elite national publications, specifically *Time*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*. By contrast, President Obama did interviews with online media when he wanted to reach young people to persuade them to sign up for the Affordable Care Act and with local television stations as he pushed for members of Congress to approve Trade Promotion Authority legislation.
- When you add up the interviews and the short question-and-answer for the presidents in their first nine months in office, you notice that Presidents Trump, Obama, and George W. Bush had very similar numbers. They are: Trump 164; Obama 169; George W. Bush 164. What that tells us is these two venues is where you see the differences in the places presidents choose to talk with reporters.

All presidents use press conferences, but the variation for these three presidents is in the split between the number of Solo and Joint ones they held. Similar to the totals for interviews and short question-and-answer sessions, the three presidents' numbers for total press conferences hovered around the same mark. They were: Trump 18, Obama, 23, and Bush 17. Yet Trump held only one Solo session while Obama had ten of them with three of his sessions held in the evening in the East Room. President Trump did not hold a night time one and Bush had one.

The author writes about White House communications operations and presidential transitions. Her books include: *Managing the President's Message: The White House Communication Operation* and *Before the Oath: How George W. Bush and Barack Obama Managed a Transfer of Power*. She directs the White House Transition Project, a nonpartisan and nonprofit group of presidency scholars who study and write about White House operations. Their work on White House office operations, presidential appointments, and presidential routine can be found at: whitehousetransitionproject.org.

Six Presidents and Their Interchanges with Reporters through October 20, 2017 274 Days into the Administration ¹

Martha Joynt Kumar

President Trump: Interchanges with Reporters

- **Press conferences, January 20, 2017 – October 20, 2017: 18 [1 Solo and 17 Joint]**
- **Short question-and-answer sessions, January 20th, 2017 - October 20, 2017: 90**
- **Interviews, January 20, 2017 – October 20, 2017: 74**
- **Addresses and remarks, January 20 – October 20, 2017: 340**
- **Tweets, January 20 – October 20, 2017: 1,894**

PRESS CONFERENCES

President Donald Trump: Press Conferences

January 20, 2017 – October 20, 2017: 18 [1Solo; 17 Joint]

White House Solo: 1

Nighttime East Room: 0

Press Conferences make up 10% of President Trump's interchanges with reporters

President Barack Obama: Press Conferences

January 20, 2009 – October 20, 2009: 23 [10 Solo, 13 Joint]

White House Solo: 5

Nighttime East Room: 4 [February 9, 2009; March 24; April 29; July 22]

Press Conferences make up 12% of President Obama's interchanges with reporters

President George W. Bush: Press Conferences

January 20, 2001 – October 20, 2001: 17 [4 Solo; 13 Joint]

White House Solo: 4

Nighttime East Room: 1 [October 11]

Press Conferences make up 9% of President George W. Bush's interchanges with reporters

President Bill Clinton: Press Conferences

January 20, 1993 – October 20, 1993: 30 [10 Solo; 20 Joint]

White House Solo: 9

Nighttime East Room: 1 [June 17]

Press Conferences make up 10% of President Clinton's interchanges with reporters

President George H. W. Bush: Press Conferences

January 20, 1989 – October 20, 1993: 25 [20 Solo; 5 Joint]

White House Solo: 14

Nighttime East Room: 1 [June 8]

Press Conferences make up 25% of President George H. W. Bush's interchanges with reporters

President Ronald Reagan: Press Conferences [President Reagan is hard to compare for the early months as he was shot March 30 and needed several weeks of recovery without public appearances]

January 20, 1981 – October 20, 1981: 4 [4 Solo; 0 Joint]

White House Solo: 4

Nighttime East Room: 0

Press Conferences make up 7% of President Reagan's interchanges with reporters

SHORT QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSIONS

President Donald Trump: Short question and answer sessions

January 20, 2017 – October 20, 2017: 90

Short Question and Answer Sessions make up 49% of President Trump's interchanges with reporters

President Barack Obama: Short question and answer sessions

January 20, 2009 – October 20, 2009: 39

Short Question and Answer Sessions make up 20% of President Obama's interchanges with reporters

President George W. Bush: Short question and answer sessions

January 20, 2001 – October 20, 2001: 122

Short Question and Answer Sessions make up 67% of President George W. Bush's interchanges with reporters

President Bill Clinton: Short question and answer sessions

January 20, 1993 – October 20, 1993: 209

Short Question and Answer Sessions make up 72% of President Clinton's interchanges with reporters

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

January 20, 1989 – October 20, 1989: 38

Short Question and Answer Sessions make up 38% of President George H. W. Bush's interchanges with reporters

President Ronald Reagan: Short question and answer sessions

January 20, 1981 – October 20, 1981: 21

Short Question and Answer Sessions make up 36% of President Reagan's interchanges with reporters

INTERVIEWS

President Donald Trump: Interviews

January 20, 2017 – October 20, 2017: 74

Interviews make up 41% of President Trump's interchanges with reporters

President Barack Obama: Interviews

January 20, 2009 – October 20, 2009: 130

Interviews make up 68% of President Obama's interchanges with reporters

President George W. Bush: Interviews

January 20, 2001 – October 20, 2001: 42

Interviews make up 23% of President George W. Bush's interchanges with reporters

President Bill Clinton: Interviews

January 20, 1993 – October 20, 1993: 50

Interviews make up 17% of President Clinton's interchanges with reporters

President George H. W. Bush: Interviews

January 20, 1989 – October 20, 1989: 38

Interviews make up 38% of President George H. W. Bush's interchanges with reporters

President Ronald Reagan: Interviews

January 20, 1981 – October 20, 1981: 33

Interviews make up 57% of President Reagan's interchanges with reporters

ADDRESSES AND REMARKS

President Donald Trump: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 2017 – October 20, 2017: 340 [3 Address Nation / Joint Session; 36 Weekly Address; 301 Remarks]; Tweets: 1,894; Percent of President's utterances that are in response to reporter queries: 40%

President Barack Obama: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 2017 – October 20, 2017: 403 [3 Address Nation / Joint Session; 39 Weekly Address; 361 Remarks] Percent of President's utterances that are in response to reporter queries: 34%

President George W. Bush: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 2017 – October 20, 2017: 423 [6 Address Nation / Joint Session; 39 Weekly Address; 378 Remarks] Percent of President's utterances that are in response to reporter queries: 35%

President Bill Clinton: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 1993 – October 20, 1993: 367 [7 Address Nation / Joint Session; 38 Weekly Address; 322 Remarks] Percent of President's utterances that are in response to reporter queries: 51%

President George H. W. Bush: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 1989 – October 20, 1989: 298 [3 Address Nation / Joint Session; 0 Weekly Address; 295 Remarks] Percent of President's utterances that are in response to reporter queries: 27%

President Ronald Reagan: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 1989 – October 20, 1981: 186 [6 Address Nation / Joint Session; 0 Weekly Address; 180 Remarks] Percent of President's utterances that are in response to reporter queries: 25%

¹ The October figures for President Trump for Remarks and Short Question and Answer sessions are tentative ones until the National Archives publishes the official ones. The figures here are based on counts of official public events as found in White House press releases and pool reports as well as 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 transcripts for each day that I receive them from the Press Office. My headings are based on ones used by the National Archives though I aggregate them [Remarks and Exchanges and Exchanges without accompanying remarks] into my own categories and divide press conferences into Solo and Joint ones.

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. There also are occasional joint sessions with U.S. government officials. 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 exchanges with reporters is also counted in the "Short Question and Answer Sessions."

INTERVIEWS. Unlike the other categories, "interviews" are only occasionally publicly released. They are regarded as the property of the news organization and, with some exceptions, the individual organizations control whether and when transcripts are released. For the Obama, George W. Bush, and William Clinton administrations, my figures represent internal counts maintained by White House staff as well as additional interviews I find that may not have been listed on the White House file. For recent presidents, I comb online sources for interviews, use information from Pool Reports issued by reporters covering the President, references in reporters' stories to their discussions with the President, and information I have obtained from reporters about their direct talks with the President either by phone or in person. I include the off-the-record luncheons, dinners, and meetings presidents sometimes have with reporters because inevitably information journalists have acquired in those sessions is shared within their news organizations and sometimes makes its way into print.

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> and the first year and a half of 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. The President's Daily Diary for Reagan is now available at the Reagan Library at: <https://reaganlibrary.gov/digital-library/daily-diary>. His personal diary can be purchased online. 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 administration 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 five presidents was put into the Radio Addresses category. All other remarks and speeches publicly given by the President form my "addresses and remarks" subcategory.