

Six Presidents and Their Interchanges with Reporters from Inauguration Day to April 29th of the Second Year: 465 Days into the Administration ⁱ

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A president's responses to reporters' queries represent a significant aspect of his public presentations. The communications choices presidents make tell us a great deal about them personally, their style, and goals as well as about their publicity opportunities and their governing environment.

Here are six takeaways from the data that follows on presidential interchanges with reporters found on pages 4-6. The tables classify into three categories the interchanges with reporters of Presidents Trump, Obama, George W. Bush, Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and Reagan. The three categories are: press conferences [joint and solo]; short question and answer sessions; interviews. Descriptions of what is included in the three categories follows on pages 6-8.

1. **Answering reporters' queries is a staple in presidential communications.** Even if they do not enjoy doing so, presidents accept the need to respond to questions posed by journalists. Counting up all of a president's public utterances – speeches, weekly radio/television addresses, press conferences, interviews, exchanges with reporters – at least one third of the occasions where he speaks are ones where he answers questions from one or more journalists. Presidents Obama [31%], George W. Bush [33%], George H. W. Bush [30%], and Ronald Reagan [32%] were remarkably similar in the percentage of the total occasions where they took questions. President Trump [42%] and Clinton [48%] had higher numbers.
2. **The first year is a time of presidential learning.** In their first year, presidents and their staffs test what communications strategies work and in what forums he is comfortable responding to reporters. During this early period, for example, President Reagan developed two communications practices that served him well for the following seven years. First, he established his night time East Room presidential press conferences as a basic part of his outreach to the public and, second, he created a Weekly Radio Address that he most often delivered live on Saturdays from Camp David where he and Nancy Reagan spent many weekends. During this 465 day time period, other presidents developed additional ways of communicating with the public, including George H. W. Bush who made use of joint press conferences with foreign leaders, Barack Obama who did extended interviews on multiple platforms, and Donald Trump who brought Twitter to the presidency.
3. **A successful communications forum is regularly adopted by other presidents.** Once a president develops a successful communications precedent, his successors are likely to

follow his path. Ronald Reagan provides an example with his use of the weekly addresses. While President George H. W. Bush did not use them until later in his presidency, Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, Obama, and, to a lesser extent Donald Trump, all gave weekly addresses from the early days of their presidencies. President George H. W. Bush also provided an additional communications tool that his successors use extensively: joint news conferences with foreign leaders and, less occasionally, with government officials.

4. **Solo presidential press conferences are no longer a dominate presidential forum.** In fact, in a comparison of all presidents from Woodrow Wilson forward, President Trump is the only president to have just one solo press conference in his first 465 days in office. For forty years, presidential press conferences were the only forum where presidents took questions from reporters. Once the sessions went on the record in the Eisenhower administration, however, the risks of making mistakes led presidents and their staffs to find alternate places and ways to speak with journalists. Presidents continue to hold press conferences, but they have cut the number of solo sessions they hold and adopted the joint session, which limits their exposure to reporters' questions from perhaps an hour down to maybe 15 minutes in a joint session. With only one solo session, President Trump has abandoned the forum in favor of joint sessions as well as other publicity platforms. Instead of answering questions for 77 minutes as he did in his one February 2017 solo session, Trump and those presidents who used joint sessions with foreign leaders call on two reporters for each side where they spend around 20 minutes responding to those reporters.
5. **Presidential interviews are a recently favored forum.** Presidential interviews with journalists are an important addition to the available publicity arsenal a president has. With press conferences fading, recent presidents have increased the interviews they conduct with reporters. Where there are interview records to compare presidents, Obama had more interviews with reporters than any of his predecessors. Four hundred and sixty-five days into his presidency, he had 187 of them. Interviews allow a president to target the people they want to talk to and the news organizations they want to satisfy. Obama, for example, used them to advance his policy initiatives, such as Trade Promotion Authority. For President George W. Bush, interviews meant he could speak to foreign audiences in countries where he was scheduled to visit. President Trump has used them to focus attention on his conservative base by favoring interviews with Fox News and other conservative television organizations.
6. **Presidential flexibility: short question and answer sessions and speeches.** President Trump reaches his electoral base through short question and answer sessions as well as interviews. As was true in the campaign, he found he could reach his base of supporters through Twitter. Now that he is president, he establishes his narrative for the day through his Tweets. In 465 days, he had 3,201 of them. That is almost seven a day. He uses them to stress his successes as well as call out his critics and allies in addition to putting a spotlight on what he views as unfair attacks on himself and his policies. With his Tweets as advance notice of what is on his mind, he can follow up with his thoughts by answering reporters' questions at the top or bottom of a meeting he might be hosting with corporation

executives, members of Congress, his Cabinet or others who come through to meet with the president. He holds these often impromptu sessions with reporters in the Roosevelt Room, Cabinet Room, Oval Office, and on the South Lawn when he is about to board Marine One and sometimes on his return home. He chooses when he wants to answer questions and which ones he will respond to.

During this 465 day period, he narrowed the forums he used and the occasions when he spoke. Overall, he did fewer weekly addresses, speeches, total press conferences, than did Presidents Obama, George W. Bush, and Clinton. At the same time, he increased his use of two forums: short question and answer sessions and Twitter. In comparing his speeches and his short question and answer sessions during his first hundred days [January 20-April 29] and the comparable period for his second year, he cut down on his remarks where he did not take reporter questions [94 down to 54], but increased the numbers for remarks and exchanges with reporters during those two time periods from 29 to 42. He increased his Tweets from 518 in the first hundred days to 642 in the second.

The first choice presidents and their staffs make is how often they will make public appearances and how frequently they will deliver remarks and more formal speeches. Recent presidents have taken advantage of the opportunities cable television provides to have the public hear their remarks on regular basis. The numbers for the early 465 day period for Trump's three most recent predecessors are similar: Obama 645; George W. Bush 698; Clinton 630. In the pre-multi cable period, Presidents George H. W. Bush and Reagan had 518 and 309. Trump's 533 remarks and speeches represent something of a return to the earlier numbers. Between his Tweets and his short question and answer sessions with reporters, Trump gets the information out that he wants to send and reaches the audiences he targets without giving frequent set speeches.

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President Trump: Interchanges with Reporters

- Press conferences, January 20, 2017 – April 29, 2018: 27 [1 Solo and 26 Joint]
- Short question-and-answer sessions, January 20, 2017 - April 29, 2018: 170
- Interviews, January 20, 2017 – April 29, 2018: 95
- Addresses and remarks, January 20, 2017 – April 29, 2018: 533
- Tweets, January 20, 2017 – April 29, 2018: 3,201

PRESS CONFERENCES

President Donald Trump: Press Conferences

January 20, 2017 – April 29, 2018: 27 [1Solo; 26 Joint]

White House Solo: 1

Nighttime East Room: 0

Press Conferences make up 9% of President Trump's interchanges with reporters

President Barack Obama: Press Conferences

January 20, 2009 – April 29, 2010: 30 [13 Solo, 17 Joint]

White House Solo: 6

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

Press Conferences make up 11% of President Obama's interchanges with reporters

President George W. Bush: Press Conferences

January 20, 2001 – April 29, 2002: 30 [5 Solo; 25 Joint]

White House Solo: 5

Nighttime East Room: 1 [October 11, 2001]

Press Conferences make up 11% of President George W. Bush's interchanges with reporters

President Bill Clinton: Press Conferences

January 20, 1993 – April 29, 1994: 56 [18 Solo; 38 Joint]

White House Solo: 15

Nighttime East Room: 1 [June 17, 1993; March 24, 1994]

Press Conferences make up 13% of President Clinton's interchanges with reporters

President George H. W. Bush: Press Conferences

January 20, 1989 – April 29, 1990: 45 [34 Solo; 11 Joint]

White House Solo: 24

Nighttime East Room: 1 [June 8, 1989]

Press Conferences make up 23% 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 had several weeks of recovery without public appearances]

January 20, 1981 – April 29, 1982: 9 [9 Solo; 0 Joint]

White House Solo: 9

Nighttime East Room: 1 [March 31, 1982]

Press Conferences make up 6% of President Reagan's interchanges with reporter

SHORT QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSIONS**President Donald Trump: Short question-and-answer sessions**

January 20, 2017 – April 29, 2018: 170

Short Question and Answer Sessions make up 58% of President Trump's interchanges with reporters

President Barack Obama: Short question-and-answer sessions

January 20, 2009 – April 29, 2010: 55

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 – April 29, 2002: 180

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

President Bill Clinton: Short question-and-answer sessions

January 20, 1993 – April 29, 1994: 321

Short Question and Answer Sessions make up 73% of President Clinton's interchanges with reporters

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

January 20, 1989 – April 29, 1990: 81

Short Question and Answer Sessions make up 41% of President Bush's interchanges with reporters

President Ronald Reagan: Short question-and-answer sessions

January 20, 1981 – April 29, 1982: 53

Short Question and Answer Sessions make up 38% of President Reagan's interchanges with reporters

INTERVIEWS**President Donald Trump: Interviews**

January 20, 2017 – April 29, 2018: 95

Interviews make up 33% of President Trump's interchanges with reporters

President Barack Obama: Interviews

January 20, 2009 – April 29, 2010: 187

Interviews make up 69% of President Obama's interchanges with reporters

President George W. Bush: Interviews

January 20, 2001 – April 29, 2002: 60

Interviews make up 22% of President George W. Bush's interchanges with reporters

President Bill Clinton: Interviews

January 20, 1993 – April 29, 1994: 64

Interviews make up 14% of President Clinton's interchanges with reporters

President George H. W. Bush: Interviews

January 20, 1989 – April 29, 1990: 70

Interviews make up 36% of President George H. W. Bush's interchanges with reporters

President Ronald Reagan: Interviews

January 20, 1981 – April 29, 1982: 78

Interviews make up 56% of President Reagan's interchanges with reporters

SESSIONS WITH REPORTERS AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL PUBLIC UTTERANCES

President Donald Trump: Percent of Public Utterances in Sessions with Reporters

January 20, 2017 – April 29, 2018: 42%

President Barack Obama: Percent of Public Utterances in Sessions with Reporters

January 20, 2009 – April 29, 2010: 31%

President George W. Bush: Percent of Public Utterances in Sessions with Reporters

January 20, 2001 – April 29, 2002: 33%

President Bill Clinton: Percent of Public Utterances in Sessions with Reporters

January 20, 1993 – April 29, 1994: 48%

President George H. W. Bush: Percent of Public Utterances in Sessions with Reporters

January 20, 1989 – April 29, 1990: 30%

President Ronald Reagan: Percent of Public Utterances in Sessions with Reporters

January 20, 1981 – April 29, 1982: 32%

ADDRESSES AND REMARKS

President Donald Trump: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 2017 – April 29, 2018: 533 [4 Address Nation / Joint Session; 43 Weekly Address; 486 Remarks];

Tweets: 3,201

President Barack Obama: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 2009 – April 29, 2010: 645 [4 Address Nation / Joint Session; 66 Weekly Address; 575 Remarks]

President George W. Bush: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 2001 – April 29, 2002: 698 [8 Address Nation / Joint Session; 65 Weekly Address; 625 Remarks]

President Bill Clinton: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 1993 – April 29, 1994: 630 [8 Address Nation / Joint Session; 64 Weekly Address; 558 Remarks]

President George H. W. Bush: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 1989 – April 29, 1990: 518 [5 Address Nation / Joint Session; 0 Weekly Address; 513 Remarks]

President Ronald Reagan: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 1981 – April 29, 1982: 309 [8 Address Nation / Joint Session; 4 Weekly Address; 297 Remarks]

ⁱ 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. For President Trump's information both of those sources often run behind in posting the information on their websites. I update them as I get more information.

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S TWEETS. I do counts for particular time periods from the Tweets archived in the Trump Twitter archive at: trumptwitterarchive.com. Click on "See All" to scroll through his Tweets. The database is easily searchable.

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 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 President Trump, 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 often 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 presidents’ 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. The same is true for the Weekly Address in the Trump administration. Other radio addresses are included in Radio Addresses as well, such as those given by George H. W. Bush who, until 1991-1992 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.

SESSIONS WITH REPORTERS AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL PUBLIC UTTERANCES. This category takes in all of the occasions where a president spoke. Presidential statements and press releases do not count as I only count instances where we know the words are his. No matter who writes a speech / remarks, the words become his when the president speaks them. This category takes the sessions where a president responds to a question posed by a reporter and measures them against the total number of public speeches and remarks.