

At 18 Months: Six Presidents and Their Interchanges with Reporters

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- Presidents communicate in a variety of ways and forums.¹ There are addresses to the nation and to Congress, weekly radio and television addresses, and speeches and remarks he regularly gives. Additionally, responding to reporters' queries has been a consistent part of a President's public presentations. At the 18 month mark for the six most recent presidents, approximately a third or more of their public appearances were ones where they responded to reporters' questions. The three forums where presidents take questions are: press conferences (joint and solo); short question and answer sessions; and interviews.
- Adding together the numbers of press conferences, short question and answer sessions, and interviews, there are similarities among the presidents during their first 18 months in office. With the exception of President Clinton who had more press interchanges than any modern President (506), the three most recent presidents have similar numbers for their sessions where they took questions. The numbers are: Trump 372; Obama 308; George W. Bush 318. Their differences lie in the type and balance of forums they favor. President Trump, for example, favors short question and answer sessions while President Obama chose interviews as his preferred forum.
- Except for President Trump, recent presidents are almost indistinguishable in the total numbers of occasions where they spoke publicly. These numbers include events and occasions where they did and did not answer reporters' queries. The totals for Presidents Obama, George W. Bush, and Clinton were similar through their first 547 days. Obama: 1,007; George W. Bush 982; Clinton 1,111. With 825, President Trump had substantially fewer public speaking events than his three recent predecessors, but he found Twitter to be a useful alternative to set speeches. By the time he became President, Twitter had a broad reach, which it did not have during earlier presidencies.
- Twitter is an important part of President Trump's public communications. His tweets serve as a way to set his narrative for the day. During his first 18 months in office, President Trump had 4,052 tweets from his @realDonaldTrump account going out to 53.4 million followers as of July 30th. These public statements serve as a way to begin his morning often followed by short question and answer sessions where he can expand on his tweets. He used Twitter successfully during the campaign, which made it easy to integrate into his presidential communications strategies.
- With the rise of cable television in the 1990s and its constant news coverage as well as with the development of alternative ways of communicating with the public through social media, presidents have increasingly spent less time than earlier presidents did answering questions in traditional White House solo press conferences. President Trump held one White House solo session in 18 months while over time Presidents Obama [7], George W. Bush [6], Clinton [16], and George H. W. Bush [29] held decreasing numbers of them.

¹ See Endnote 1 for a description of what constitutes a press conference, a short question and answer session, and an interview. In order to create comparability among presidents, I use the categories established by the National Archives for its *Public Papers of the Presidents* series for the official public record of each President.

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President Trump: Interchanges with Reporters

- **Press conferences, January 20, 2017 – July 20, 2018: 35 [4 Solo and 31 Joint]**
- **Short question-and-answer sessions, January 20, 2017 - July 20, 2018: 227**
- **Interviews, January 20, 2017 – July 20, 2018: 110**
- **Tweets, January 20 – July 20, 2018: 4,052**

PRESS CONFERENCES²

President Donald Trump: Press Conferences

January 20, 2017 – July 20, 2018: 35 [4 Solo; 31 Joint]

White House Solo: 1

Nighttime East Room: 0

President Barack Obama: Press Conferences

January 20, 2009 – July 20, 2010: 36 [15 Solo, 21 Joint]

White House Solo: 7

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

President George W. Bush: Press Conferences

January 20, 2001 – July 20, 2002: 37 [6 Solo; 31 Joint]

White House Solo: 6

Nighttime East Room: 1 [October 11, 2001]

President Bill Clinton: Press Conferences

January 20, 1993 – July 20, 1994: 66 [21 Solo; 45 Joint]

White House Solo: 16

Nighttime East Room: 2 [June 17, 1993; March 24 1994]

President George H. W. Bush: Press Conferences

January 20, 1989 – July 20, 1990: 54 [42 Solo; 12 Joint]

White House Solo: 29

Nighttime East Room: 1 [June 8, 1989]

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 – July 20, 1982: 11 [11 Solo; 0 Joint]

White House Solo: 11

² See Endnote 1 for a description of what constitutes a press conference, a short question and answer session, and an interview. In order to create comparability among presidents, I use the categories established by the National Archives for its *Public Papers of the Presidents* series for the official public record of each President.

Nighttime East Room: 3 [1982: March 31, May 13, June 30]

SHORT QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSIONS

President Donald Trump: Short question-and-answer sessions

January 20, 2017 – July 20, 2018: 227

President Barack Obama: Short question-and-answer sessions

January 20, 2009 – July 20, 2010: 67

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

January 20, 2001 – July 20, 2002: 205

President Bill Clinton: Short question-and-answer sessions

January 20, 1993 – July 20, 1994: 360

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

January 20, 1989 – July 20, 1990: 100

President Ronald Reagan: Short question-and-answer sessions

January 20, 1981 – July 20, 1982: 63

INTERVIEWS

President Donald Trump: Interviews

January 20, 2017 – July 20, 2018: 110

President Barack Obama: Interviews

January 20, 2009 – July 20, 2010: 205

President George W. Bush: Interviews

January 20, 2001 – July 20, 2002: 76

President Bill Clinton: Interviews

January 20, 1993 – July 20, 1994: 80

President George H. W. Bush: Interviews

January 20, 1989 – July 20, 1990: 85

President Ronald Reagan: Interviews

January 20, 1981 – July 20, 1982: 86

PERCENTAGE OF ALL PUBLIC UTTERANCES OCCURRING IN SESSIONS WITH REPORTERS

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

January 20, 2017 – July 20, 2018: 45%

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

January 20, 2009 – July 20, 2010: 31%

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

January 20, 2001 – July 20, 2002: 32%

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

January 20, 1993 – July 20, 1994: 46%

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

January 20, 1989 – July 20, 1990: 31%

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

January 20, 1981 – July 20, 1982: 30%

ADDRESSES AND REMARKS

President Donald Trump: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 2017 – July 20, 2018: 614 [4 Address Nation / Joint Session; 47 Weekly Address; 563 Remarks]; Tweets: 4,052

President Barack Obama: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 2009 – July 20, 2010: 761 [5 Address Nation / Joint Session; 78 Weekly Address; 678 Remarks]

President George W. Bush: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 2001 – July 20, 2002: 824 [9 Address Nation / Joint Session; 77 Weekly Address; 738 Remarks]

President Bill Clinton: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 1993 – July 20, 1994: 775 [8 Address Nation / Joint Session; 77 Weekly Address; 690 Remarks]

President George H. W. Bush: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 1989 – July 20, 1990: 594 [5 Address Nation / Joint Session; 0 Weekly Address; 589 Remarks]

President Ronald Reagan: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 1981 – July 20, 1982: 391 [9 Address Nation / Joint Session; 11 Weekly Address; 371 Remarks]

ⁱ The July 2018 figures for President Trump for Remarks and Short Question and Answer sessions are tentative 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. The Archives has used the same basic principles in establishing its categories and in assigning events to each. That assures consistency across administration, which allows us to compare presidents and their publicity practices.

PRESS CONFERENCES. Press conferences are divided into Solo and Joint sessions. I accept the National Archives designation of what was a press conference and then I divide them 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 than Joint ones as more reporters are called on when the President stands alone to answer queries. 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 is not yet available and the one for President Clinton is available as of this writing July 27, 2018. The author filed a FOIA case [2013-0549-F] that resulted in its release. As those Diaries are made 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.

TWEETS. I use the Trump Twitter Archive to count presidential tweets. The archive accumulates President Trump's tweets as he posts them. The archive is searchable by word as well as by date. The website is: trumptwitterarchive.com. To search the site, Select "See All."