



THE WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT
1997-2021



Kinder Institute on
Constitutional Democracy
University of Missouri

Smoothing the Peaceful Transfer of Democratic Power

REPORT 2021-46C

PRESIDENTIAL INTERACTIONS WITH REPORTERS AT NINE MONTHS

Marhta Joynt Kumar, *Director, White House Transition Project*
Emeritus Faculty, Towson University

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

The White House Transition Project. Begun in 1998, the White House Transition Project provides information about individual offices for staff coming into the White House to help streamline the process of transition from one administration to the next. A nonpartisan, nonprofit group, the WHTP brings together political science scholars who study the presidency and White House operations to write analytical pieces on relevant topics about presidential transitions, presidential appointments, and crisis management. Since its creation, it has participated in the 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017, and now the 2021. WHTP coordinates with government agencies and other non-profit groups, e.g., the US National Archives or the Partnership for Public Service. It also consults with foreign governments and organizations interested in improving governmental transitions, worldwide. See the project at <http://whitehousetransitionproject.org>

The White House Transition Project produces a number of materials, including:

- **WHITE HOUSE OFFICE ESSAYS:** Based on interviews with key personnel who have borne these unique responsibilities, including former White House Chiefs of Staff; Staff Secretaries; Counsels; Press Secretaries, etc. , WHTP produces briefing books for each of the critical White House offices. These briefs compile the best practices suggested by those who have carried out the duties of these office. With the permission of the interviewees, interviews are available on the National Archives website page dedicated to this project:
- **WHITE HOUSE ORGANIZATION CHARTS.** The charts cover administrations from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama and help new White House staff understand what to expect when they arrive and how their offices changed over time or stayed the same.
- **TRANSITION ESSAYS.** These reports cover a number of topics suggested by White House staff, including analyses of the patterns of presidential appointments and the Senate confirmation process, White House and presidential working routine, and the patterns of presidential travel and crisis management. It also maintains ongoing reports on the patterns of interactions with reporters and the press in general as well as White House staffing.
- **INTERNATIONAL COMPONENT.** The WHTP consults with international governments and groups interested in transitions in their governments. In 2017 in conjunction with the Baker Institute, the WHTP hosted a conference with emerging Latin American leaders and in 2018 cosponsored a government transitions conference with the National Democratic Institute held in November 2018 in Montreal, Canada .

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The Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy. A central element of the University of Missouri's main campus in Columbia, Missouri, the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy prepares students for lives of thoughtful and engaged citizenship by equipping them with knowledge of the ideas and events that have shaped our nation's history.

<https://democracy.missouri.edu> .

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An analysis of the interchanges with reporters of Presidents Reagan through Biden at the end of October of their first year, demonstrates similar as well as differing presidential press patterns. The main findings:

PRESIDENTS RESPOND TO QUERIES IN THEIR FAVORED SETTINGS

Whether they like it or not, presidents answer reporters' questions throughout their years in office. Yet they do so on their own terms choosing settings they prefer. For President Biden, his favored setting is taking a limited number of questions at the end of speeches or prior to getting on Marine One or at an airport on his way to or from the White House. At the same time, he was the least likely of the seven presidents to hold a press conference and the most likely to take a question or two at the end of an event. On the other hand, Obama preferred interviews (131) rather than regularly answering questions from White House reporters in informal sessions (40). Of the seven, President Clinton willingly met with reporters in all three forums, outdistancing the others in the press conferences and short question and answer sessions he held in the early months.

Three Venues for Presidents

There are three main venues presidents have used to answer questions.

Press Conferences. Since 1913 all presidents have held press conferences where they answered reporters queries. The off-the-record sessions went on the record in 1953 and on television in 1955. Since that time, presidents have been less willing than those before Eisenhower to hold news conferences where they air their thinking. In the last fifty years, presidents have used two additional forums to meet reporters: short question and answer sessions and interviews. Presidents have added a new variation: joint news conferences with foreign leaders and, less frequently, with governmental officials.

Short Question and Answer Sessions. These are occasions where a president takes questions in an impromptu manner. The prime venues and occasions where presidents and reporters informally meet are on the South Lawn, at the end of scheduled remarks, and prior to an Oval Office meeting with a foreign leader, or in the Cabinet and Roosevelt Rooms meeting with officials inside and outside of government. While sometimes not announced beforehand, White House press and communications staff build in such opportunities, often in an effort to reduce journalists' pressure on a president to hold a press conference.

Interviews. The third forum for answering questions is in interviews with one or more journalists. Those sessions are usually of much greater length than the short Q&As, but shorter than a solo press conference, especially when the president is out of Washington campaigning for himself or for others. Trump and Obama often did four and five minute interviews with Trump doing them for campaigning and Obama held them at the White House as part of his effort to get Congress to pass pieces of legislation.

REDUCED NUMBER OF SOLO WHITE HOUSE PRESS CONFERENCES; INCREASE IN JOINT ONES.

Daily responses meet the needs of some reporters, but most view the solo White House press conference as the best forum for meeting the president to get his responses to multiple questions. Solo press conferences have the benefit of follow up questions as well as multiple reporters posing queries that dig into a president's reasoning on policy as well as explanations of his actions, goals, and assessments. Since President George H. W. Bush developed them as a regular publicity resource, joint press conferences with foreign and government leaders are an important presidential diplomatic tool. However they are less satisfying to reporters as the president and his guest generally take no more than

three questions per leader. The solo sessions run from a half to a full hour with some presidents calling on from a dozen (Obama) to close to two dozen reporters (Trump, Clinton). While President Reagan held his press conferences in a White House setting where he took questions from the full press corps, his successors gradually have moved away from that model. Four of Biden's five solo press conferences, for example, were held in European locations on his first and second trips there.

CHANGES IN THE PRESIDENTIAL MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

The three cable news networks provide additional presidential publicity opportunities. Prior to their creation and White House presence (CNN in 1981; MSNBC and Fox in 1996), news organizations were more willing to give prime time space to a president for an address to the nation than they are now willing to do. Today presidential speeches are regularly covered by cable networks, most often during their daytime programming. Networks do not want to give up their evening entertainment programming and its substantial revenue for presidential speeches and news conferences unless a president's press conference will be a major news event.

BIDEN ANSWERS QUESTIONS MORE FREQUENTLY BUT TAKES FEWER OF THEM THAN HIS SIX PREDECESSORS

While President Biden has taken questions more often at his events than his predecessors, he spends less time doing so. He provides short answers with few follow-ups when he takes questions at the end of a previously scheduled speech. He often takes one or two questions while his predecessors (Trump, Clinton, GW Bush) took more queries at fewer events. Counting weekends, in the 285 days between January 20 and October 31, Biden answered at least one question from a reporter 53% of those days. He sometimes took questions on the weekends as he was leaving or returning from a trip, especially to and from his Delaware residence. Within the full week figures, though, the trend line is down from the figure for January - July (59%) and August and October (39%). If you count only weekdays and exclude federal holidays in the January 20 through October time period (195 days), Biden took one or more questions 63% of the days. Breaking it down in the January - July period, he responded to a reporter's query 74% of the weekdays. In August - October, however, the percentage of weekdays where Biden responded to reporters fell to 41%.

ANSWERS ARE FREQUENT, BUT NOT NECESSARILY EXPLANATORY

While brief, Biden's answers are often newsworthy. For example, on September 15th he met with business leaders to discuss COVID vaccinations. In his introduction, he spoke a total of 3:36 minutes and in the last two seconds responded to a reporter's question: did he have confidence in General Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who had recently come under criticism in some quarters for his actions at the end of the Trump administration. Biden answered: "I have great confidence in General Milley." He did not provide the reasoning behind his statement.

THE PATTERNS PRESIDENTS DEVELOP IN THEIR FIRST MONTHS ARE SUBJECT TO AMENDMENT

President Trump did not hold the first South Lawn session with reporters until September of his first year. A nighttime White House East Room one hour news conference was President Reagan's signature publicity event. He held his first one in March 1982 and never looked back. He used them for the remainder of his term. Reagan began his Saturday radio addresses, another major publicity tool, in April of his second year.

APPENDIX

Seven Presidents and Their Interchanges with Reporters through October 31 of Their First Year 285 Days into an Administration*

President Biden: Interchanges with Reporters

- Press conferences, January 20, 2021 – October 31, 2021: 8 [5 Solo and 3 Joint]
- Informal question-and-answer sessions, January 20, 2021 – October 31, 2021: 180
- Interviews, January 20, 2021 – October 31, 2021: 16
- Total events where Biden took reporters' questions: 196
- Addresses and remarks (not including ones where Biden took reporters' questions) January 20, 2021 – October 31, 2021: 169

Press Conferences: Solo And Joint With Foreign and Government Leaders

President Joe Biden: Press Conferences

January 20, 2021 – October 31, 2021: 8 [5 Solo; 3 Joint]
 White House Solo: 1
 Nighttime East Room: 0

President Donald Trump: Press Conferences

January 20, 2017 – October 31, 2017: 19 [1 Solo; 18 Joint]¹
 White House Solo: 1
 Nighttime East Room: 0

President Barack Obama: Press Conferences

January 20, 2009 – October 31, 2009: 23 [10 Solo, 13 Joint]
 White House Solo: 5
 Nighttime East Room: 4 [February 9, 2009; March 24; April 29; July 22. He did not hold additional ones during his presidency.]

President George W. Bush: Press Conferences

January 20, 2001 – October 31, 2001: 18 [4 Solo; 14 Joint]
 White House Solo: 4
 Nighttime East Room: 1 [October 11]

President Bill Clinton: Press Conferences

January 20, 1993 – October 31, 1993: 31 [10 Solo; 21 Joint]
 White House Solo: 9
 Nighttime East Room: 1 [June 17, 1993]

President George H. W. Bush: Press Conferences

January 20, 1989 – October 31, 1989: 27 [22 Solo; 5 Joint]
 White House Solo: 15
 Nighttime East Room: 1 [June 8, 1989]

¹ August 25, 2019 President Trump held back-to-back press conferences. In Biarritz, France for G7 meetings, President Trump first gave a 34-minute joint press conference with French President Emmanuel Macron followed by a 37-minute solo session. Other presidents have given more than one press conference a day when traveling abroad, but Trump is the first I have who held two distinct back-to-back sessions. Almost all of his joint sessions with his White House Coronavirus Task Force are listed as news conferences because President Trump answered many reporters' questions and did so for an extended period of time.

President Ronald Reagan: Press Conferences²

January 20, 1981 – October 31, 1981: 4 [4 Solo; 0 Joint]
 White House Solo: 4
 Nighttime East Room: 0

Informal Question and Answer Sessions: Presidents Give Remarks and Take Reporters' Questions

President Joe Biden: Informal question-and-answer sessions

January 20, 2021 – October 31, 2021: 180

President Donald Trump: Informal question-and-answer sessions

January 20, 2017 – October 31, 2017: 93

President Barack Obama: Informal question-and-answer sessions

January 20, 2009 – October 31, 2009: 40

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

January 20, 2001 – October 31, 2001: 124

President Bill Clinton: Informal question-and-answer sessions

January 20, 1993 – October 31, 1993: 216

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

January 20, 1989 – October 31, 1989: 43

President Ronald Reagan: Informal question-and-answer sessions

January 20, 1981 – October 31, 1981: 28

Interviews

President Joe Biden: Interviews

January 20, 2021 – October 31, 2021: 16

President Donald Trump: Interviews

January 20, 2017 – October 31, 2017: 83

President Barack Obama: Interviews

January 20, 2009 – October 31, 2009: 131

President George W. Bush: Interviews

January 20, 2001 – October 31, 2001: 42

President Bill Clinton: Interviews

January 20, 1993 – October 31, 1993: 51

President George H. W. Bush: Interviews

January 20, 1989 – October 31, 1989: 40

President Ronald Reagan: Interviews

January 20, 1981 – October 31, 1981: 35

Percentage of All Speaking Sessions Where President Took Reporters' Questions

President Joe Biden: Percent of All Speaking Sessions Where President Took Reporters' Questions

² President Reagan is hard to compare for the early months as he was shot March 30 1981 and had several weeks of recovery without public appearances

January 20, 2021 – October 31, 2021: 55%

President Donald Trump: Percent of All Speaking Sessions Where President Took Reporters' Questions

January 20, 2017 – October 31, 2017: 41%

President Barack Obama: Percent of All Speaking Sessions Where President Took Reporters' Questions

January 20, 2009 – October 31, 2009: 33%

President George W. Bush: Percent of All Speaking Sessions Where President Took Reporters' Questions

January 20, 2001 – October 31, 2001: 35%

President Bill Clinton: Percent of All Speaking Sessions Where President Took Reporters' Questions

January 20, 1993 – October 31, 1993: 50%

President George H. W. Bush: Percent of All Speaking Sessions Where President Took Reporters' Questions

January 20, 1989 – October 31, 1989: 28%

President Ronald Reagan: Percent of All Speaking Sessions Where President Took Reporters' Questions

January 20, 1981 – October 31, 1981: 27%

Addresses and Remarks Without Reporters' Questions

President Joe Biden: Number of Addresses and Remarks Without Questions

January 20, 2021 – October 31, 2021: 169

President Donald Trump: Number of Addresses and Remarks Without Questions

January 20, 2017 – October 31, 2017: 282

President Barack Obama: Number of Addresses and Remarks Without Questions

January 20, 2009 – October 31, 2009: 388

President George W. Bush: Number of Addresses and Remarks Without Questions

January 20, 2001 – October 31, 2001: 340

President Bill Clinton: Number of Addresses and Remarks Without Questions

January 20, 1993 – October 31, 1993: 299

President George H. W. Bush: Number of Addresses and Remarks Without Questions

January 20, 1989 – October 31, 1989: 284

President Ronald Reagan: Number of Addresses and Remarks Without Questions

January 20, 1981 – October 31, 1981: 178

Addresses and Remarks

President Joe Biden: Addresses and Remarks (including Remarks where he takes reporters' questions)

January 20, 2021 – October 31, 2021: 348 [3 Address Nation / Congress Joint Session; 15 Weekly Address; 330 Remarks]

President Donald Trump: Addresses and Remarks (including Remarks where he takes reporters' questions)

January 20, 2017 – October 31, 2017: 354 [3 Address Nation / Congress Joint Session; 35 Weekly Address; 316 Remarks]
Tweets: 1,999

President Barack Obama: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 2009 – October 31, 2009: 425 [3 Address Nation / Congress Joint Session; 41 Weekly Address; 381 Remarks]

President George W. Bush: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 2001 – October 31, 2001: 434 [6 Address Nation / Congress Joint Session; 40 Weekly Address; 388 Remarks]

President Bill Clinton: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 1993 – October 31, 1993: 390 [7 Address Nation / Congress Joint Session; 40 Weekly Address; 343 Remarks]

President George H. W. Bush: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 1989 – October 31, 1989: 311 [3 Address Nation / Congress Joint Session; 0 Weekly Address; 308 Remarks]

President Ronald Reagan: Addresses and Remarks

January 20, 1981 – October 31, 1981: 190 [6 Address Nation / Congress Joint Session; 0 Weekly Address; 184 Remarks]

CONTACT INFORMATION

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* 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 [<https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/cpd/2019/08>] 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.

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S POLITICAL RALLIES. President Trump did not include most of his political rallies in the official record of his presidency. In 2017, eight are included in the *Public Papers* and two were not. From 2018-2021, only two are included in the *Public Papers* out of 46 in 2018, 21 in 2019, 99 in 2020, and 2 in 2021. President Trump did not include in the *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents* his January 6th speech on the Ellipse that preceded the attack on the Capitol. I include his political rallies in my record of his speeches.

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. Other presidents did not personally tweet as a method to communicate with the public.

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 reporters from 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. In March and April, 2020, President Trump had long news conferences when the Task Force on the Coronavirus came to the White House Briefing Room to speak. The President generally spoke first and answered questions at length. While they were sometimes titled as "briefings" these sometimes 120+ minute sessions fit into the category of news conferences.

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> 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.

WATCHING INTERCHANGES WITH REPORTERS ON FACTBASE. You can watch most of the on-the-record video interchanges by President Biden and President Trump with the press as well as speeches at Factba.se. Click on Joseph Biden / Donald Trump and then in the dropdown menu, choose Topics and click on “Browse Speeches and Interviews.” Most are also available on You Tube.