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Presidential Influence of the News Media: The Case of the Press Conference

MATTHEW ESHBAUGH-SOHA

Can presidents influence news coverage through their press conferences? Scant research has explored this question leaving two possible answers. On the one hand, presidential news management efforts, combined with norms of journalistic professionalism and the cost of producing news, suggest that the nightly news will cover presidential press conferences. On the other hand, the costs of delivering press conferences espoused by some scholars insinuate that press conferences will have little impact on news coverage. To determine whether the press conference influences news coverage, I use plagiarism detection software to assess the propensity of television news to incorporate the president's rhetoric into stories that cover the president's press conferences. I find that news reports on the press conference rely heavily on the president's words, indicating that it is an important event for presidential influence of the news media and perhaps eventually the public.

Keywords presidents, news coverage, press conferences, leadership

The presidential press conference is a mainstay of the presidential-press relationship. Since 1989, presidents have held nearly 600 press conferences, an average of 27 per year. Aside from ceremonial speeches, which average several hundred per year (Ragsdale, 2009), the press conference is the single most common public event held by the American president, and it is the most frequent planned and direct interaction with the press. Despite its regularity, however, we know very little about whether the press conference generates news coverage. Without question, the press conference provides an opportunity for the president to talk about his policy priorities; engage the media and public through an alternative, active, and engaging format; and work through policy problems in front of his audience (Kumar, 2007). It also provides another means that the president may communicate with the public. Even so, presidents may avoid press conferences given the time required to prepare for them and their negative impact on public opinion (Rottinghaus, 2010). Presidents may instead participate in other activities, such as “going local” (Cohen, 2010), to influence media coverage of their administrations. Although Kumar (2007, p. 256) notes that dominating the news is one of the goals of a presidential press conference, as of this writing,

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we simply do not know whether the press conference affords presidents influence over the evening news.

The purpose of this article is to explore whether presidential press conferences influence news coverage of the president. It asks: Can presidents influence news coverage through their press conferences? Under what conditions is presidential leadership of the news most likely, and what do these findings say about the typically adversarial nature of the president-press relationship? To answer these questions, I have collected a sample of 135 presidential press conferences from 1990 through 2010, matching them with *CBS Evening News* transcripts. The article then compares the text of the presidential press conference with television news transcripts using plagiarism detection software to ascertain whether the president's words made the news. This approach supplies an opportunity to examine a specific public event deemed at least as costly as beneficial to presidential leadership of the news and at a level of aggregation unused by previous research. It generates greater insight into the costs and benefits of the press conference to presidential influence of the news media. Although the impact appears short-lived, I find that the press conference is important to the president's efforts to generate news coverage and that network news coverage of the press conference relies heavily on the president's own words.

The importance of understanding presidential leadership of the media through a press conference cannot be overstated. In a democracy, citizens need access to the president to judge, evaluate, and even provide guidance to the president as he, Congress, and his administration make important policy decisions. The news media, as the primary, daily conduit between the public and its government, provides this linkage. Moreover, news coverage in general and the press conference in particular allow media to question the president, to serve as a watchdog and raise issues for consideration by the public. This provides a necessary check on the abuse of power by government, a fundamental principle of the U.S. Constitution. Despite the extent to which presidents vie for public support to affect policy and win reelection (Canes-Wrone, 2006; Kernell, 1997), they appear to have limited success moving public opinion directly (Edwards, 2003). The news provides presidents with an alternative venue to express their policy preferences to the American people and attempt to lead the nation, most often as they were elected to do. Therefore, exploring the presidential press conference more thoroughly, as this article does, provides additional insight into whether and to what extent the media reflect the president's message in their news coverage and how this might affect presidential leadership or governance.

The President's Public Influence of the News Media

That the president dominates the daily news cycle is an often-repeated truism of political science. One need only examine the amount of news coverage devoted to the president relative to any other political figure or institution to reach this conclusion. As one example, Graber (2006, p. 251) shows that, from July 2003 through June 2004, the president averaged 45 monthly stories on the three major networks' evening news programs. This compares with 35 and 12 monthly stories, on average, for Congress and the Supreme Court, respectively. Others show a similar ubiquity to presidential news (Cohen, 2008). Indeed, a virtual cottage industry has exploded recently, documenting the president's leadership of news media on the Iraq war (Aday, 2010; Baum & Groeling, 2010; Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007; Hayes & Guardino, 2010). A particularly beneficial strategy to presidential leadership of the news media is not a national address (Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008) or State of the Union address (Wanta, Stephenson, Turk, & McCombs, 1989), which command large viewing audiences, or radio addresses (Horvit, Schiffer, & Wright, 2008), but

going local, an effort by the president's public relations team to appeal to local news media throughout the nation (Cohen, 2010). All in all, scholarly consensus that media index their news coverage to elite discourse virtually guarantees the president news coverage on the prominent issues facing the nation (Bennett, 1990).

This perspective of presidential influence contrasts with studies that show media leadership of the president. Wood and Peake (1998) and Edwards and Wood (1999) conclude that presidents are highly responsive to news coverage of major foreign policy issues (but see Wanta & Foote 1994; Wood, 2009, p. 697). Although they find presidents have more capacity to lead on some domestic policy issues, such as health care reform, others find limited leadership of the news media on an issue central to all presidential administrations: the economy (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2005). A recent study documents, nevertheless, that presidents can influence the news media if they act strategically, targeting issues of priority to them but not to the news media (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2011). Moreover, targeted appeals generally receive coverage in major newspapers, even though less than half of all the president's legislative appeals actually make the news (Barrett, 2007).

This debate pervades the literature's examination of the presidential press conference. On the one hand are those who maintain that the press conference, particularly when delivered on primetime television, is a negative event that undermines the president. Hager and Sullivan (1994, p. 1094) remarked that "press conferences offer few attractive opportunities for presenting the president's position." In referring to press conferences as "high risk performances," Rottinghaus (2009, pp. 301–302) argues that "presidents are [unlikely] to be able to control the trajectory of the discussion and more likely to be boxed into answering a question on an issue that they may prefer not to discuss." He finds, indeed, that press conference appeals for policies depress public support for those policies. Presidential press conferences do not even increase the number of presidential stories in local newspapers (Cohen, 2010, p. 136). Press conferences are seen as so disadvantageous for presidents that scholarship looking at the impact of "going public" on presidential success in Congress excludes press conferences as a possible source for a public appeal (Barrett, 2004).¹

An extensive analysis of the questions asked during press conferences confirms why these events are perceived to be negative. Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, and McDonald (2006) show, for example, that the directness, assertiveness, and adversarial nature of questions have increased over time. Watergate was a particularly important event in the nature of press conference questions, as questions asked during press conferences held after 1969 were statistically more aggressive than those asked before 1969 (Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, & Beckett, 2010). In addition, Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, and McDonald (2007) find that presidents face more aggressive questions during their second term in office and when unemployment is high. Because questions on foreign affairs are less adversarial (Clayman et al., 2007), there may be some benefit to presidents when they use the press conference to address use of force actions (see Bennett et al., 2007, p. 170). Still, this view from the literature is that press conferences "are net negatives for presidential communications" (Rottinghaus, 2010, p. 34).

On the other hand are those scholars who contend that, despite public risk, presidents have numerous incentives to hold press conferences. The White House contends, first of all, that the press conference allows the president to lead news coverage, build public support, and explain his policy decisions (Kumar, 2007, pp. 256–257). Second, it can be an important tool because presidents choose on whom to call during a press conference, they often schedule the event when it is convenient for them (and not necessarily for journalists), and reporters reveal potential questions to the press secretary during the daily gaggle. Each of these helps the president prepare for the press conference and may encourage him

to transform a perceived negative event into something beneficial for his presidency and policy agenda (Kumar, 2007, pp. 273–276). Presidents can also anticipate questions and, therefore, their responses to questions allow them to discuss a number of issues that they may be unable to address in a single speech. That press conferences have increased in number since the Reagan administration (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2003; Kumar, 2007) and that the adversarial nature of questions has also declined for recent administrations (Clayman et al., 2010) suggest that press conferences may be becoming more beneficial than costly to presidents. Although it may seem obvious that the press conference will make the news, the current literature does not assess whether and to what extent press conferences influence news coverage. This study will inform our understanding of presidential influence of the media by determining whether the presidential press conference is an effective tool for generating presidential news coverage.

The Meaning of Presidential Influence of the News

There are many potential ways to consider presidential influence of the news media. A well-conceived presidential communications strategy could influence the types of issues that the media cover. This may demonstrate influence over the media's agenda if the news covers the president's policy priorities repeatedly, paraphrases the president's words, or covers myriad additional stories related to the president's policy priorities. It may influence the frames that the news uses to explain issues of public concern. Or it may influence the tone of news coverage, something that tends to happen when presidents go local (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2006). Despite the benefits of examining any of these forms of influence, this article focuses on one specific and important measure of influence: whether the president's own words spoken at a presidential press conference permeate television news coverage of the press conference. In other words, the definition of influence for this article is the extent to which news broadcasts borrow the president's own words in their crafting of stories on the president's press conferences. The greater the percentage of words in a broadcast that are the president's, the more influence I conclude the president has had over the news media.

This definition does not assess a number of alternative goals and targets of influence that the president may have in holding a press conference. First, presidents hope to influence a large audience with their public remarks and press conferences. This may include reaching the public or Congress, and is not limited to influence over the news. The primetime press conference, for instance, is designed to target a relatively large, primetime audience, to connect directly with the viewing public, not a news audience. Whereas the *CBS Evening news* averaged 5.98 million viewers in 2009, President Obama's primetime press conference on July 22, 2009, attracted 24.7 million viewers.² Therefore, a primary advantage to presidents who hold a primetime press conference is to grapple with difficult issues in a national address for the possible benefit of influence over public opinion, despite the limited effectiveness of such efforts (Rottinghaus, 2010).

Second, joint press conferences are less about influencing viewers or the news than shaping diplomatic relations with other nations. Since George H. W. Bush, joint press conferences with foreign leaders have become an expected component of a visit by a head of state to the United States or of a presidential trip to another nation. The idea in holding a joint press conference is to coordinate consistent statements delivered by foreign leaders and the president by answering a small number of questions from reporters in a controlled setting. Moreover, both leaders answer questions from reporters, which reduces the costs related to questions that might target the president alone, particularly those of a scandalous

nature (Kumar, 2007, pp. 268–269). If the president influences the news through this format, then this is an added benefit of holding a joint press conference, although it may not be the primary goal of holding one.

All in all, there are several ways to measure presidential influence over the news media, just as there are a variety of other goals at work when presidents hold particular types of press conferences. My definition of presidential influence of the news does not exhaust all possible ways that presidents may influence the news or others. It simply states that when news organizations rely on the president's own words in their broadcasts, the president has influenced the news in a particular way. It specifies a precise form of influence, one that can be measured and tested using quantitative methods.

The Likelihood of Presidential News Coverage

The current literature provides no clear expectation for presidential influence of news coverage through a presidential press conference. Therefore, I rely on some recent research that considers more generally when presidents are likely to make the news. Specifically, I borrow from Cohen's (2010) theory of presidential news management. It holds that presidents can manage or take advantage of journalistic professionalism and the profit incentive of the news business to influence news coverage of their press conferences. Even so, the president's political environment may suppress public demand for news, decreasing the likelihood that a press conference will make the news. Thus, the tendency for the presidential press conference to generate news coverage is conditioned by the president's place in American politics and the subsequent demand for and cost of producing presidential news.

The first theoretical frame contends that journalists have a professional commitment to cover that which is important. Because the president of the United States is an important political figure, his presidency and surrounding events, such as a press conference, should be newsworthy. The presidential press conference, like the State of the Union address or oval office speeches delivered during times of national crisis, is a part of democratic tradition. Moreover, journalists demand press conferences because they see them as vital to maintaining a free and independent press (Kumar, 2007, p. 255). This professional incentive does not guarantee presidential news coverage (Cohen, 2008), but it increases the likelihood that the press conference will be covered on the evening news. Cohen (2010, p. 106) goes so far as to hypothesize that press conferences will generate high levels of news coverage because press conferences turn passive reporters into active participants. For this reason, reporters are not only likely to cover the president's press conferences, they are also more likely to cover the president's perspective and not search for additional sources or perspectives (Cohen, 2010, p. 105; Zaller, 1998), a common byproduct of journalistic professionalism.

A second theoretical frame holds that what makes the news is a function of the profit incentive of the news business (Bennett, 2009; Cohen, 2010; Dunaway, 2008; Hamilton, 2004). Since audience preferences (measured in terms of the number of viewers) drive ratings and ratings dictate what networks can charge advertisers for commercial time during their programs, heightened audience interest will increase the chances that a presidential press conference will be covered on the nightly news. Although data specifically on interest in the president are lacking, Hamilton (2004, p. 77) reports that "political figures/events in Washington" are most likely to generate news topics followed "very closely." Thus, the president is likely to be covered because Americans are interested in seeing him on the news (see Graber, 2006, p. 273).

Of course, news production is more variable than this. Even if journalists see the president as newsworthy, he may not always be. Even if news audiences prefer political news on the presidency, it may be more profitable to cover other subjects at different times. Although the president makes the news often, he does not always do so. Variability in public demand for presidential news helps to explain variation in the propensity of press conferences to make the evening news. In short, when there is public demand for presidential news, it is likely to be profitable and, thus, the president should make the news.

One way to gauge the public's demand for presidential news is to examine the president's political environment. If the public likes the president and signals that they prefer the president's perspective, this should increase the likelihood of news coverage of the president's press conferences. This may be assessed in two ways. First, conditions of divided government suggest that audiences demand a variety of perspectives from the news about their government. They are not sold on the president's view alone, but elected a Congress of the opposing party to help the president govern. More precisely, divided government presents an obvious and legitimate alternative voice to the president which, according to the indexing hypothesis (Bennett, 1990), should reduce the amount of news time or space devoted to the president's perspective. Additional failures, such as on his legislative agenda (Bond & Fleisher, 1990; Edwards, Barrett, & Peake, 1997), may further reduce demand for news on the president or, at least, offer additional perspectives that will be considered legitimate alternatives to the president's. Therefore, I test whether divided government decreases the likelihood that the news will cover the president's press conference.

Second, the level of public support for the president supplies an indirect evaluation of the public's current interest in him and, presumably, news about him. On this point, theory is not entirely clear. At once, if the public approves of the president's job performance, this implies that the audience is more interested in presidential news and, therefore, that the evening news will be more likely to cover the president's press conferences when he is more popular. It is equally likely, however, that because presidents tend to be more newsworthy when their approval ratings fall (Groeling & Kernell, 1998), the opposite could instead be true, that the press is more likely to report on the president when he is unpopular. Either way, I control for the effect of public support for the president on news coverage in the quantitative models.

The variability of audience demand for news fluctuates according to predictable patterns in presidential press relations (Grossman & Kumar, 1981). The president is most newsworthy early in his administration during a favorable honeymoon period as the public, and thus the press, have more interest in learning about the president and his policies. This should not only encourage presidents to hold more press conferences, but should also increase the tendency for media to report on the president's press conferences. After presidents enter a period of disillusionment, characterized by mistakes, gaffes, and legislative failures, news coverage tends to become less frequent yet more negative. Thus, news broadcasts should cover presidential press conferences more during the presidential honeymoon period than at other times in the president's tenure. President-press antagonism may persist over an administration, especially during a second term. It is likely, moreover, that presidents become less newsworthy during their second terms as legislative agendas wane and the media turn to the next set of presidential candidates. Therefore, news broadcasts should cover a second-term president's press conferences less than a first-term president's press conferences.

Another way for presidents to generate demand for news about their press conferences is to hold them only rarely. The president's press conference is most likely to be newsworthy when it addresses that which is timely and novel (Graber, 2006). In other words, a

press conference should be most newsworthy when it is a relatively unique and rare event. Much as presidents are unlikely to be granted airtime for a national address when they keep requesting it (Kernell, 1997), the novelty of a press conference fades as presidents concentrate more press conferences in a short period of time and if they deliver more of them as their administration lengthens. This suggests two hypotheses. First, more press conferences delivered in a short period of time will reduce the tendency for news coverage of the conference. Second, the more press conferences a president delivers over time, the less likely the evening news will cover the president's press conference.

Finally, the vast majority of news emanates from Washington, D.C., and news from the nation's capital is bestowed a sense of credibility and legitimacy. Moreover, the cost of producing a news report on a presidential press conference should be even less when it is held in Washington, D.C., and the White House because the infrastructure for holding a press conference is already in place and reporters are nearby. With cuts to newsroom budgets, reporters may be even less likely to travel with the president, further reducing the tendency for them to be able to cover those press conferences (Stelter, 2010). Therefore, press conferences delivered in Washington are more likely than those held in other locations to generate news coverage.

The press conference may be conceived of as having two parts: the opening statement and a question and answer period. Although each part allows presidents to speak about issues of concern to them, their opening statements may indicate what issues are most important to them. Moreover, the opening statement provides a useful short-cut to journalists in determining which issues to cover on their evening news broadcast. Thus, from both a professional and economic standpoint, the opening statement, if covered in the news broadcast, should be a strong predictor of how much a news story covers the president's perspective as stated during a press conference. If the opening statement is a clearer indication of the president's top priority—what he would prefer to have covered on the news—then determining how often the news covers the opening statement and whether its coverage varies in the ways hypothesized above is a worthy exploration.³ Therefore, I not only model coverage of the president's opening statements as an independent variable in the analysis below, I also test separately for what influences the tendency for news reports to cover the president's opening statement. Although the president's opening statement may be less likely to make the news given the media's discretion to dictate what story comes out of the press conference, the opening statement is still likely to be prominent in news broadcasts.

Taken together, journalistic professionalism and the profit incentive of news organizations suggest that presidents should have success managing or influencing the news by holding a press conference. Limited time and resources, as well as the public's interest in seeing the president on the news, means that it makes sense economically and professionally to broadcast at least part of what the president says, especially if the press conference is relatively rare and held in Washington, D.C. Still, unfavorable political conditions may suppress audience interest in the news, decreasing demand for—and thus coverage of—the president's press conferences.

Data

For this article, the universe of presidential press conferences, whether solo, joint, domestic, or international, consists of the 542 press conferences held between March 1990 and November 2010 from the *Public Papers of the Presidents*.⁴ With the help of a research assistant, I randomly selected 135 conferences—26% of the sample—noting the date of

each press conference, its location (Washington, D.C., or not), and its time (primetime or not) and whether or not it was televised by the *CBS Evening News*. The models control for the last two conditions.⁵ We then copied the entire text of the press conference and pasted it into a text document, after which we copied only the opening statement of the press conference and pasted it into a separate text document.

Next, we compiled corresponding *CBS Evening News* transcripts from Lexis-Nexis that covered the president's press conference and searched for all stories related to the president on the day of or day after the president's press conference and saved those stories. If the press conference occurred prior to the evening news, we collected that evening's transcripts. If the press conference occurred after the evening news, typically for primetime presidential press conferences, we collected transcripts for the following day. We then copied these files into separate text documents. If multiple stories covered the president's press conference, we combined each into one file for the primary part of the analysis.

I examine press conferences between March 1990 and November 2010 for a number of reasons. First, the available universe of press conferences begins with George H. W. Bush's March 23, 1990, press conference, and I examine the *CBS Evening News* only due to data availability. Simply, Lexis-Nexis archives *CBS Evening News* transcripts only since February 1990; the other networks' transcripts are available beginning several years later. Second, I wanted to maximize exposure to a range of presidents who have had different styles in dealing with the press directly, which is important in explaining the number of press conferences presidents deliver (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2003). For this reason, I choose variation on presidents as opposed to network coverage. Given the availability of NBC and ABC news transcripts only since 1994, comparing different news programs would have eliminated the possibility of including George H. W. Bush in the sample.

In addition, I only examine press conferences, and not other interactions with news media, such as interviews or exchanges with reporters. Interviews are likely to make the news, at least for the interviewer's employer. For example, if Brian Williams interviews the president, that interview will make *NBC Nightly News* and likely no other broadcast.⁶ Exchanges with reporters are often attached to other remarks or are short and hurried as the president scurries to Marine 1 or rushes to another engagement. Although they can have opening remarks, many do not, they tend to be shorter than press conferences and more variable in length and number of questions, and presidents do not prepare for them like they prepare for a press conference. Mainly, I examine the press conference because it is the most high profile of all presidential interactions with the press. The event is unique enough not to be lumped in with other, qualitatively distinct interactions with the news media.

The primary dependent variables are byproducts of a comparison of the text of the president's press conference and the corresponding news transcripts. They are produced using a plagiarism detection software program called WCopyFind 2.7, available for download.⁷ The software compares two or more documents and, according to the software's Web site, it "looks through them for matching words in phrases of a specified minimum length." It then produces a report file that indicates which phrases match and produces a percentage matching score. This score, the percentage of the news transcript that borrows directly from the text of the president's press conference, is my primary dependent variable, analyzed in Table 1. Table 1 analyzes separate scores for the comparison of the entire press conference and all news transcripts combined, whereas Table 2 analyzes separately a comparison of the president's opening remarks with a news transcript that covers the president's press conference.

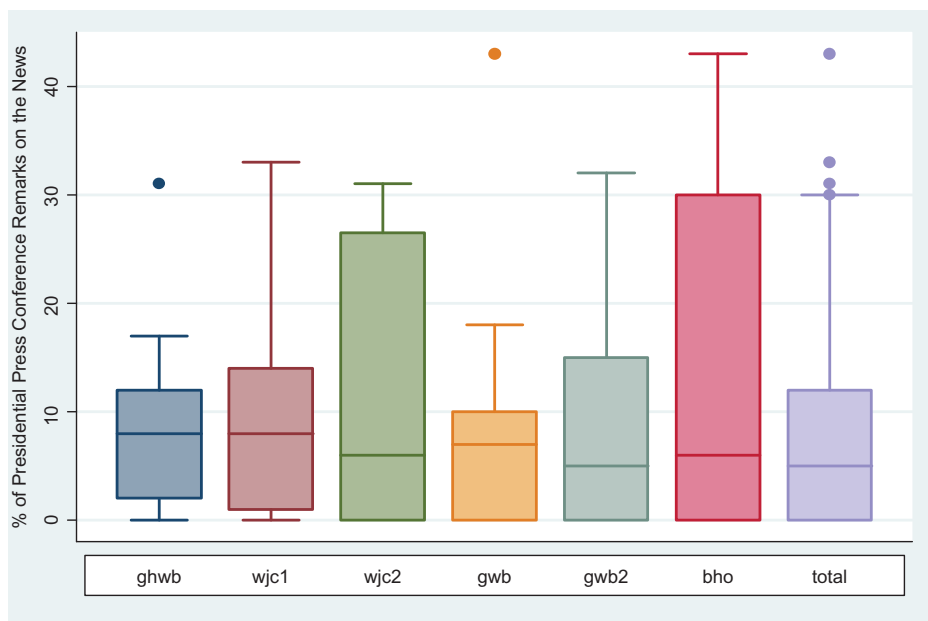


Figure 1. Percentage of the president's press conference comments on the evening news, by presidential term, 1990–2010 (color figure available online).

To give the reader some perspective on what these numbers look like, Figure 1 reports the average scores by presidential term. This figure is a box plot of the percentage of the president's own language in his press conferences that the evening news incorporates into its broadcast. The lower and upper quartiles of the variable are represented by the lines outside of the boxes, while the dots indicate any outliers. The middle line is the median percentage of the president's press conference remarks that make the news. The median tends to be fairly consistent across presidential administrations, and also for the variable that represents all of the data in the sample (the total category). President George H. W. Bush has the tightest range, whereas Barack Obama has the widest range, with no outliers. The entire sample reveals a mean of 7.3 and a standard deviation of 8.95 for my primary dependent variable. Thus, on average, 7.3% of news transcripts are adopted directly from presidential press conferences.

This measure is an improvement over previous research in a number of ways.⁸ First, most studies of presidential leadership of the news media examine counts of policy mentions in presidential speeches and their impact on counts of stories about those policy issues (see Edwards & Wood, 1999). Although an effective way to illustrate presidential leadership of the news media, it cannot explicitly account for whether the news reports the president's point of view. By examining the percentage similarity of two documents, this article offers a more precise measure of the president's influence of news coverage. Second, it offers scholars the opportunity to examine an efficiently collected interval-level measure of presidential news, one that can be adapted and used by other subfields, including judicial politics (Corley, 2008; Corley, Collins, & Calvin, 2011).⁹

Additional independent variables were used to test my hypotheses. First, the president's approval rating is the percentage of the public that approves of the president's job performance indicated in the closest Gallup poll preceding the president's press

conference.¹⁰ Second, divided government is coded one when either house of Congress is controlled by the opposition party and zero otherwise. Third, presidential honeymoon is coded one if the press conference occurred during the first 6 months of the president's first term in office and zero otherwise. The president's second term is coded one when a press conference occurred during either President Bush's or Clinton's second terms. Fourth, the number of conferences the president held in a month gauges the impact that a heavy grouping of press conferences in a short period of time may have on the relationship between the press conference and news coverage of it. Finally, the president delivers press conferences sequentially over time. The number of each press conference determines whether more press conferences delivered over the course of a presidential administration affects news coverage.

Findings

To begin, of the 135 press conferences in the sample, 84 (or 62% of the sample) had enough similarity with news coverage to generate a comparison score.¹¹ Opening statements were covered moderately less, with only 25 generating a percentage-comparison score.¹² Additionally, a random sample of 33 of these press conferences was used to examine sustained news coverage. Although news coverage the day of the press conference may be impressive, only six press conferences generated a plagiarism score on the next day's news.¹³

An OLS regression analysis of the percentage of press conference remarks that make the evening news reveals several important findings. First, Table 1 shows that the president's opening statement affects news coverage, indicating that the president's top priority is newsworthy. This, in turn, increases the percentage of the president's words used by the newscast by over 4 percentage points. Second, the president's proximity to Washington, D.C., and the White House makes it less costly for news to report the president's words and they do, by nearly 6% more over press conferences delivered elsewhere. On average, this increases the percentage of the president's words borrowed by the news to over 13%. Table 1 also provides evidence that divided government decreases the percentage of the president's press conferences that the evening news borrows in its reporting in part because it indexes coverage to divergent viewpoints from Congress. The substantive effect of this coefficient is -4.5% .

In addition, two other variables matter to the similarity between the president's words and news coverage. First, the number of press conferences in a month is inversely related to the percentage of the president's words reported on the evening news. With every additional press conference the president delivers in a month, the news borrows about 2% less of the president's words on the news. On average, this drops the typical broadcast's similarity score of 7.3% to 5.3%. Second, the president's press conferences become a more powerful tool of media influence, however slightly, as he delivers more conferences during his administration. This is counterintuitive in one sense, as more press conferences would presumably reduce the newsworthiness of later press conferences. Yet, another dynamic may be at work: Presidents tend to give more press conferences early in their tenure, but reduce their numbers as the costs of holding them increase. Therefore, news coverage of later press conferences is more to the president's liking because later press conferences are rarer events and, therefore, more newsworthy. Even so, the impact is slight, at less than a tenth of a percentage point increase in press conference–news coverage similarity. Of my two control variables, only primetime press conferences (and not press conferences televised on CBS) lead to significantly less coverage of the president's words on the evening news.¹⁴

Table 1
Determinants of press conference–news coverage similarity

Variable	Reduced model	Administration effects	Conference type effects
Honeymoon	1.55 (3.70)	0.13 (3.36)	1.80 (3.46)
Second term	−3.64 (3.87)	−3.53 (3.75)	−3.50 (3.46)
Number in month	−1.89* (1.04)	−1.62 (1.03)	−1.43 (0.96)
Conference number	0.09* (0.05)	0.09* (0.05)	0.09* (0.05)
Presidential approval	0.11 (0.09)	0.12 (0.09)	0.13 (0.09)
Divided government	−4.52* (2.60)	−3.83 (2.69)	−4.68* (2.49)
Washington, D.C.	5.67* (1.62)	5.78* (1.66)	5.18* (1.58)
Opening statement	4.53* (2.04)	4.04* (2.07)	2.71 (2.38)
Primetime conference	−13.00* (4.11)	−14.91* (4.84)	−13.63* (4.05)
Televised by CBS	2.14 (3.43)	2.53 (3.46)	0.88 (3.32)
Clinton		0.21 (2.67)	
George W. Bush		0.26 (3.19)	
Obama		6.76 (4.83)	
Joint conference			−4.32* (2.06)
Constant	−3.88 (7.85)	−5.67 (8.21)	−2.21 (7.74)
R^2	.24	.26	.27
F	6.69*	6.77*	5.05*
N	135	135	135

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. George H. W. Bush is the reference category in the administration effects model. Solo domestic press conference is the reference category in the conference effects model. The dependent variable is the percentage of the president's press conference rhetoric that is reported on the evening news.

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed).

I also present a separate model that includes administration effects to account for any variation in news leadership by administration. Descriptively, there are few differences between presidents, as the percentage of press conferences that generated a comparison score ranged from a low of 65% for George W. Bush to a high of 77% for George H. W. Bush. Although administration effects do overwhelm the previously significant impact of divided government and the concentration of press conferences delivered in a month, neither Presidents Clinton, Bush, nor Obama's scores are statistically different from George H. W. Bush's score, according to the second column of coefficients in Table 1.

In addition, Table 1 models effects by type of press conference. Although there may be incentives for presidents to deliver numerous joint press conferences with foreign dignitaries (Kumar, 2007), these findings illustrate that the most effective and consistent way for presidents to generate coverage of their own words on the evening news is through a solo domestic press conference, which increases the percentage similarity between press conferences and news broadcasts by over 4 points. Joint press conferences are clearly less newsworthy, and they drive down the overall percentages associated with news coverage of the president's press conference. In fact, solo press conferences generated a plagiarism score 89% of the time, compared with only 54% of joint press conferences. Opening statements lose their statistical significance in the conference effects model, given the relatively high correlation ($r = .44$) with solo press conferences.¹⁵

Table 2
Determinants of opening statement–news coverage similarity

Variable	Reduced model	Administration effects	Conference type effects
Honeymoon	0.93 (1.45)	−0.18 (0.12)	−0.05 (0.12)
Second term	0.56 (1.00)	0.18 (0.14)	0.13 (0.10)
Number in month	1.42 (0.90)	0.07 (0.06)	0.07 (0.05)
Conference number	0.0002 (0.0115)	−0.002 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)
Presidential approval	0.03 (0.03)	−0.001 (0.004)	0.001 (0.003)
Divided government	0.71 (0.96)	0.13 (0.10)	0.06 (0.09)
Washington, D.C.	2.25* (0.74)	0.19* (0.07)	0.15* (0.07)
Primetime conference	0.08 (1.98)	0.05 (0.22)	0.14 (0.34)
Televised by CBS	1.00 (1.13)	0.14 (0.13)	0.01 (0.14)
Clinton		0.07 (0.12)	
George W. Bush		−0.02 (0.12)	
Obama		0.45* (0.19)	
Joint conference			−0.26* (0.08)
Constant	−3.73 (2.79)	0.08 (0.32)	0.20 (0.26)
R^2	.12	.17	.18
F	2.06*	2.71*	2.84*
N	135	135	135

Note. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. George H. W. Bush is the reference category in the administration effects model. Solo domestic press conference is the reference category in the conference effects model. The dependent variable is the percentage of the president's opening press conference statement that is reported on the evening news.

* $p < .05$ (one-tailed).

With the promise of the statistically significant opening statement coefficient in Table 1, I present three additional analyses of the president's opening remarks in Table 2. Specifically, Table 2 models what affects the tendency for newscasts to borrow words from the president's opening remarks only in a reduced model and in models with separate effects by presidential administration and conference type. As with Table 1, location matters greatly to the tendency of newscasts to cover the president's opening remarks, a finding that holds across all three models. Presidents find it easier to influence news coverage of their opening remarks in press conferences held in Washington given the lower costs of covering these press conferences relative to others.

Concerning administration effects, I note the following. First, President George W. Bush was very much unlike his contemporaries. Often, his opening statements were brief and general comments, with a relatively small 14% of his opening statements generating a plagiarism score. This compares with 22% of all opening statements generating a score. Second, only President Obama differed significantly from George H. W. Bush in opening remark coverage, with about 4.5% greater similarity. Obama tends to score most favorably—and 60% of his opening remarks generated a plagiarism score—but these numbers are likely to have declined during his third and fourth years in office.

Conference effects are significant. A joint press conference is much less likely than a solo domestic press conference to warrant news coverage of an opening statement. It is the type of press conference—the solo domestic press conference—that dictates not only all press conference coverage, but also coverage of the president's opening remarks, with 41% of solo and 8.3% of joint press conference opening remarks generating a score. Much as qualitative inferences predicted, the goal of a joint press conference is not to generate news coverage so much as to foster diplomacy and offer a public forum for a meeting between the president and a foreign leader. If the president's goal is to influence news coverage, it is clear that the solo domestic press conference affords the president the best opportunity to do so, whether I analyze the opening statement or the text of the entire press conference.

Conclusion

Research has produced mixed evidence as to the effectiveness of presidential speeches in leading news coverage, with very limited research examining this relationship for the presidential press conference. Being one of the first to do so, this study illustrates that presidents influence news coverage of their press conferences regularly and according to predictable variation in the political environment. There is much incentive for journalists to cover these press conferences on the evening news and, when they do so, this affords presidents an indirect avenue to reach the American people. The findings are especially strong for solo press conferences and for those held in Washington, D.C.

The findings reveal a number of points. Most importantly for presidents, press conferences can be effective tools to generate news coverage. Most presidential press conferences are covered on the evening news, many of the president's own words penetrate news coverage, and the president's opening statements dictate a solid percentage of news coverage. That much of what explains the similarity between the words of the president's press conferences and news coverage of the president is whether or not the news story covers his opening statement follows from my expectation that journalists have a professional incentive to cover the president's perspective and are active participants in a press conference. Other factors related to the profit incentive of news organizations add to our understanding of the similarity of press conferences and news coverage. Mainly, when the president makes it less costly for the Washington press corps to cover his conferences by scheduling them in Washington, D.C., the president enjoys higher coverage of his own words on the evening news.

Even though this article shows significant benefit to the presidential press conference in influencing news coverage, there are qualifications to this conclusion. The benefits of press conferences appear restricted to solo domestic press conferences, with other types of press conferences showing limited benefits to presidential influence of the news media. For instance, primetime press conferences do not increase the president's influence over the news but, rather, suppress the tendency for the evening news to cover the president's words. As it applies to primetime press conferences, Marlin Fitzwater may be correct that formal East Room and evening press conferences are "dinosaurs," to be replaced by informal afternoon conferences delivered in the press briefing room that allow the president—not the press—to be the focal point of news coverage.¹⁶ Yet, news coverage may not be the primary goal of a primetime event. Much as joint press conferences are designed to foster diplomatic relations with other heads of state, the primetime press conference may be geared more to the president's goal of leading the public. The primetime press conference, among other benefits, allows the president to grapple with difficult questions in front of a relatively large viewing audience. It is up to future research to parse out the benefits of

primetime press conferences when they tend to depress public support for the president's policies (Rottinghaus, 2010).

Whether news coverage of press conferences extends to presidential influence of the American public remains to be seen. Obviously, if the president's best strategy to generate news coverage is with an afternoon press conference, he is likely to have a relatively small audience to engage directly. Nevertheless, since many of these are covered on the evening news, the president can expect to at least influence the public indirectly through this news coverage, given the strong connection between what's on the news and public opinion (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Additional research is needed, however, to explore the tone of this news coverage, the extent to which the president's words may be undermined by alternative voices in a story, and what impact, if any, fragmentation of news audiences has on the effectiveness of the presidential press conference as a tool of media leadership. It is also worth exploring whether presidents' comments in other exchanges with reporters and interviews make the news, to what extent, and under which circumstances. Knowing the extent to which these alternative venues for responding to press questions influence the news provides additional information on the effectiveness of different news management strategies. Despite this need for future research, this article demonstrates that the press conference is not simply a means for media to ask questions of the president, but that it is also a reliable way for presidents to influence news coverage of their administrations, an important way for presidents to potentially reach the public in the American democracy.

Notes

1. Barrett (2004, p. 350) excludes responses to questions in press conferences from his measure of going public because, he asserts, they are reactive, not necessarily part of his policy agenda, and that others "will probably be less concerned with these remarks because they are made at the urging of another individual, not as part of a prepared presidential statement."

2. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

3. Although a likely indicator of the president's top priorities, Smith (1990, p. 84) cautions that "we cannot automatically assume that the opening statement is the presidential agenda." Indeed, there are numerous instances where presidents did not offer a lengthy opening statement, but still had a policy focus in those press conferences.

4. We found each press conference and copied and pasted the text of the press conferences from the American Presidency Project (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>). We searched only "Oral: News Conferences" and "Oral: News Conferences—Joint." This approach is less inclusive than others, such as Rottinghaus (2010), who code a public remark as a press conference "if press officials who were able to ask any questions attended the event" (p. 260). I do not consider informal, brief question and answer sessions to be press conferences. My numbers appear to differ slightly from Kumar's (2007). Given that her data are not monthly, and this analysis begins in March, I cannot determine precisely by how many.

5. Our sample included two primetime press conferences (out of 13 total for our time period) and 17 press conferences that were televised on CBS. When CBS televised the press conference, our Lexis-Nexis search produced a transcript of the actual press conference, along with opening remarks by the anchor or White House correspondent.

6. Obviously, I am speculating here as I have no evidence. This could be a good paper for another to write.

7. See <http://plagiarism.phys.virginia.edu/Wsoftware.html>. The analysis uses the default settings that, among other things, match on a minimum of six consecutive words. This avoids the possibility that the plagiarism detection software is matching on more common words or phrases, such as President Obama, the president of the United States, or health care reform. To counter the concern

that the phrase matches are solely coincidental, I collected plagiarism scores for 10% of the data that match on a minimum of 10 consecutive words (see Corley, Collins, & Calvin, 2011, footnote 7). These scores correlate at .983 and do not alter the substantive results presented in this article. The average score drops by just over 1 percentage point nevertheless.

8. It is also a more conservative estimate. There are times when the topic of the president's press conference generates news coverage, even though it did not produce a plagiarism score. For instance, the president could talk about the Persian Gulf war in a press conference, and the news story might reference the president's news conference as a lead-in to a story on the Persian Gulf war but not quote the president or repeat the president's words directly. As a point of comparison, my sample produced 116 (out of 135) press conferences that were referenced on the *CBS Evening News*, but only 84 (out of 135) generated a comparison score.

9. This discussion and presentation of dependent variables is attributable to that of Corley, Collins, and Calvin (2011) and Corley (2008), who further justify the value of using WcopyFind.

10. Average presidential approval ratings are 53% in the present sample; the average approval rating for the universe of Gallup poll results for the entire study time frame is 54%.

11. Of these, two Saturday afternoon press conferences were not covered by the news because there was no news broadcast that evening due to PGA golf tournaments.

12. A larger number (47) of the president's opening statements made the news (see Note 7).

13. Even so, 21 of these 33 press conferences were still mentioned on the next day's news.

14. I modeled a number of alternative specifications, including measures for reelection years, the misery index, whether a press conference's opening statement addressed foreign or domestic policy, the effects of lame duck years (last 2 years of a second term), and whether or not a president was Republican. None of these variables produced interesting results or altered any of the coefficients' significance or direction.

15. Because I did not hypothesize a conditional relationship, I do not present the model. Nevertheless, modeling an interaction between opening statements and solo press conferences reveals that as presidents deliver more solo domestic press conferences, the impact of the opening statement on news coverage declines, by about 8 percentage points.

16. Memo from Marlin Fitzwater to George H. W. Bush, December 20, 1988, John Sununu Files, Office of the Chief of Staff to the President, Formerly Withheld, NLGB Control Number 11317, George Bush Presidential Library, provided by Han (2011).

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