

# Presidential Press Conferences over Time

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*Scholars have debated whether the president's public activities are a function of political and economic factors (presidency-centered variables) or individual presidents and their administration's tendencies (president-centered variables). This article examines one of the only quantitative studies that assesses the influence of these variables on presidential press conferences over time. I replicate this study (Hager and Sullivan 1994) and find the authors' conclusions to be misleading. I then present methodologically correct analyses that show—consistent with the qualitative evidence—that the behavior of individual presidents offers the best explanation of press conferences over time.*

The president's public activities are of substantial theoretical importance (Brace and Hinckley 1992; Edwards 1983, 1989; Eshbaugh-Soha 2000; Hager and Sullivan 1994; Hinckley 1990; Kernell 1997; Lammers 1982; Lowi 1985; Ostrom and Simon 1988; Powell 1999; Ragsdale 1984, 1987). Equally, press conferences are one of the most important vehicles by which presidents communicate to the media and public. Yet very few studies have explored this means of communication, and it remains unclear what explains variation in the use of presidential press conferences over time. The qualitative evidence and conventional wisdom maintain that the use of press conference is a function of individual presidents and their decisions. The quantitative evidence holds, conversely, that context is more important. In this research note, I extend and correct the only published quantitative analysis of press conferences, demonstrating significant individual control over them.

## Two Perspectives on the President's Press Conferences

Political scientists have used two broad perspectives to explain the president's public activities.<sup>1</sup> The presidency-centered approach claims that contextual variables, such

as technological, economic, and political factors, shape presidents' public activities, such as speechmaking. The president-centered perspective maintains that individual presidents and their unique preferences determine the number of presidential speeches.

The president- and presidency-centered perspectives also frame the explanation of presidential press conferences.<sup>2</sup> The president-centered model of press conferences holds that individual president's preferences determine the frequency of press conferences. Grossman and Kumar (1981, 243–9) note that the press conference is different for each president. Some presidents, like John Kennedy, enjoyed giving press conferences and used them as a means to express their policy priorities. Other presidents avoided press conferences, because of their dislike of the media (Nixon) or because they preferred other means of communicating with the media (Ford).

Although presidents begin each press conference like a speech, with a statement about their policy priorities and other topics that they wish to discuss, the press conference is more for the press than for the president. Press conferences give the media direct access to the president and allow members of the media to ask specific questions and receive immediate responses from the president. Nevertheless, Grossman and Kumar find it odd that some presidents have avoided press conferences because

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<sup>1</sup>The president- versus presidency-centered debate has also framed some research on presidential vetoes (see Gilmour 2002; Shields and Huang 1997).

<sup>2</sup>Press conferences are formal evening events, afternoon sessions in the press office, and joint sessions with foreign dignitaries in Washington or abroad (Ragsdale 1998).

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presidents have several ways to control them (but see Lammers 1981). The president calls on members of the media during the question and answer portion of the conference and might strategically avoid certain reporters who he knows will ask a difficult or controversial question. Reporters often hint at what questions they will ask in daily “gaggles” (see Kumar 2001), so members of the president’s staff can advise the president on which reporters to avoid. Presidents can also announce press conferences just hours before they take place, leaving reporters less prepared to ask tough questions. Individual presidents set the tone and direction of press conferences, and variation by president is crucial to explaining press conferences (Grossman and Kumar 1981; Walcott and Hult 1995).

The presidency-centered perspective maintains that political, economic, and technological factors are more central to the explanation of presidential press conferences than individual presidents are. Hager and Sullivan (1994) find that divided government, a president’s reputation, and technological advances all lead to a decline in press conferences over time. They also observe that press conferences have declined since the Truman administration because presidents have more and less confrontational means with which to convey a message publicly. Hager and Sullivan conclude that presidential press conference behavior “reflects more the standard trend generated by contextual forces,” (1994, 1094) and that press conferences offer an uncontrolled setting that presidents will avoid to avert embarrassment and misstatement (see also Lammers 1981). Furthermore, Hager and Sullivan argue that the presidency-centered approach “explained variation [just] as well as the individual presidents model” and it “provides the best opportunity for systematic study of the presidency” (1994, 1098).

The importance of Hager and Sullivan’s (1994) work lies in their alternative explanation to the conventional wisdom, that presidential press conferences are not primarily a function of individual presidents and their decisions. Despite this contribution, Hager and Sullivan’s article should be revisited for several reasons. First, Hager and Sullivan’s (1994, 1095) press conference model raises methodological concerns. Their corrections for autocorrelation and treatment of missing data likely compromise the accuracy of their findings.<sup>3</sup> Second, their findings disagree with the qualitative evidence, which characterizes

<sup>3</sup>They use a sixth-order autocorrelation correction, which does not make intuitive sense to explain political phenomena. In addition, Hager and Sullivan (1994, 1086) exclude 1966 from their analysis, which offends a basic rule of time-series methodology, that each time point be equidistant from the next. There are other problems with Hager and Sullivan’s (1994) measures and methodology. A correlogram of the press conferences autocorrelation function shows a second, not a sixth-order autoregressive process. Their “increment-

the press conference as a unique public event over which presidents have substantial discretion and control. Moreover, their findings may be time bound. Presidents Bush and Clinton, who governed after the Hager and Sullivan study, used press conferences in a manner much different from their predecessors. They gave many more press conferences than their predecessors did and used press conferences as a tool in their public strategy. Indeed, President Bush used press conferences to control information the media disseminated about him (Nelson 1998, 13).<sup>4</sup> Accounting for 12 more years of data could alter Hager and Sullivan’s (1994) basic conclusions. Finally, the causal logic of Hager and Sullivan’s argument and conclusions is that technological factors and political context have reduced the frequency of press conferences. If this argument is correct, then contextual factors should account for the frequency of press conferences under Bush and Clinton as well. If the press conference activity of these presidents is distinct, however, we will have critical evidence that the presidency-centered thesis is not determinative of presidential press conference activity.

## Replication and Findings

My first task is to replicate Hager and Sullivan’s press conferences model (1994, 1095) using their dataset and methods.<sup>5</sup> Table 1 presents four models. Model A is Hager and Sullivan’s model published in their 1994 article. It shows that several contextual and two presidential dummies are

talism” measure is also tricky. It is essentially a smoothed lagged dependent variable computed on past measures of the present and previous administrations. Assuming that this measure has properties like a lagged dependent variable, any AR correction with it makes parameter estimates inconsistent (see Greene 2000, 550). Their varied uses of autoregressive corrections on the same dependent variables (1093) should also be cause for concern. Finally, it is unclear from their reasoning why they drop variables from Table 3 that measure Executive Office of the President staff size, chief diplomat (an index of executive agreements, trade balance, and whether or not the U.S. is at war), and percent of the electorate that is independent, when their combined presidency-centered/individual model produces the same  $R^2$ , yet a smaller Q-statistic, AIC, and SEE.

<sup>4</sup>I confirmed this finding during a personal communication with the former president on April 1, 2002. He indicated a clear preference for press conferences. Not only did he simply “enjoy” talking to reporters in the press room, he thought that speaking directly to the media on a regular basis was a way to influence the media without using other means such as press releases and leaks, which he despised (see Woodward 1999).

<sup>5</sup>Hager and Sullivan (1994) measure technology as an index of lighted runways, the speed of Airforce One, and the number of television outlets. Reputation is a residual measure based on presidential approval, minimum percentage of presidential party seats in Congress, and year in office (see Hager and Sullivan 1994, Appendix).

TABLE 1 Presidential Press Conference Activity, 1949–1984

	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D
Technology $t_{-1}$	-7.20 (4.00)	-16.64* (4.37)	-7.94 (6.21)	-4.28 (5.62)
Economic deterioration	-0.82 (0.59)	-1.41* (0.21)	-0.16 (0.72)	-0.42 (0.71)
Reputation $t_{-1}$	-0.38* (0.17)	-0.32* (0.11)	0.02 (0.25)	-0.14 (0.19)
Presidential approval	0.18 (0.11)	-0.50* (0.15)	0.09 (0.20)	0.16 (0.19)
Divided government	-9.53* (4.11)	0.72 (2.71)	-17.18 (62.64)	-9.69 (5.04)
Incrementalism	-0.83* (0.28)	0.41 (0.29)	-0.54 (0.38)	-0.88* (0.35)
Reelection year	-1.33 (2.40)	5.39* (1.50)	-2.41 (2.94)	-3.58 (3.14)
Eisenhower	-21.80* (5.93)	17.49 (8.77)	-10.93 (21.17)	-20.96 (9.72)
Kennedy	-30.33* (10.72)	33.68 (15.93)	-24.56 (43.43)	-34.55 (16.52)
Johnson	-14.62 (14.25)	51.19* (20.96)	-9.19 (44.42)	-18.44 (19.54)
Nixon	-19.57 (16.84)	60.55* (24.76)	-2.90 (42.67)	-30.06 (24.84)
Ford	-13.37 (18.48)	57.31 (28.00)	8.16 (47.98)	-23.89 (28.18)
Carter	-11.78 (21.56)	77.94* (31.54)	-0.05 (51.48)	-24.06 (30.88)
Reagan	-13.56 (23.67)	97.59* (32.44)	6.82 (53.76)	-29.64 (34.38)
Constant	58.01* (11.45)	4.08 (15.33)	49.06 (49.18)	63.06* (14.45)
AR1		-0.57(0.27)		
AR2		0.38(0.15)*		
AR3		1.00(0.28)*		
AR4		-0.38(0.21)		
AR5		-1.14(0.34)*		
AR6	No value reported	-0.82(0.31)*	-7.94(6.21)	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.91	.90	.69	.75
SEE	3.69	3.06	4.63	5.42
Ljung-Box Q	9.42	29.99*	3.41	23.30*
N	35	35	35	36

\* $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. 1966 is excluded from Models A, B, and C.

Source: Compiled from data provided and published by Hager and Sullivan (1994, 1095).

statistical significant. From this model, Hager and Sullivan (1994, 1094) concluded that presidency-centered variables provide for a more accurate explanation of press conferences than president-centered variables do.

Model B, C, and D are my attempts at replication, using Hager and Sullivan's (1994) dataset, their methodological techniques, and estimation procedures. Because Hager and Sullivan are unclear whether they model a

single AR coefficient at the sixth lag or one for each of the first six lags, I model press conferences using both techniques. Model B includes an AR6 coefficient for each of the first six lags. It is similar to Hager and Sullivan's published findings (Model A), but the significant Ljung-Box Q indicates substantial autocorrelation in the model. The statistically significant coefficients are therefore invalid. Model C includes an AR6 coefficient at only the sixth lag. It produces no statistically significant variables. Finally, I include 1966 in Model D, which also has unreliable estimates due to autocorrelation.<sup>6</sup> In short, I cannot replicate Hager and Sullivan's (1994) findings, and some alternative model specifications produce unreliable estimates due to autocorrelation.

I now present an alternative model using Hager and Sullivan's data updated through 1996. Hager and Sullivan's findings may be further undermined or possibly supported with three more presidential terms and 12 more years and of data. Table 2 presents these findings with a few changes. First, because there is a fairly clear decline in press conferences from 1949 to 1988, I include a time trend variable to account for this decrease.<sup>7</sup> Second, I model Bush and Clinton dummies.<sup>8</sup> The qualitative evidence supports press conference control by individual presidents. If dummy variables for Presidents Bush and Clinton are statistically significant, then we have evidence that the press conference is an event over which presidents have substantial individual control.

Table 2 shows the importance of individual presidents to the explanation of press conferences. In Model E, both the Bush and Clinton dummies are statistically significant and positive, controlling for all contextual variables hypothesized by Hager and Sullivan (1994) to be important. The Bush and Clinton administrations increase the number of press conferences by about 31 and 28, respectively. Consistent with the qualitative evidence that President Bush preferred press conferences as part of his

<sup>6</sup>The only way to correct autocorrelation in Model D is by modeling all variables, including chief diplomat, differenced management stress, and differenced independents measures, and differencing the technology index. Only this model is free from autocorrelation, and just the presidential dummy variables are statistically significant. Furthermore, to ensure that a statistical package did not hinder successful replication, I modeled these equations in RATS, E-views, and SAS, the program used by Hager and Sullivan (1994).

<sup>7</sup>Although using presidential dummies (DDE-RWR) is preferred, including all dummies induces autocorrelation in the model. A time trend (suggested by a reviewer) accounts for the decline in press conferences from 1949 to 1996 without autocorrelation.

<sup>8</sup>A reviewer suggested that I include a trend-squared variable instead to account for the apparent curvilinear shape to the press conferences series. This variable is statistically insignificant when modeled with the trend variable and contextual factors in Table 2. Another option is to combine Bush and Clinton dummies into one variable. This too is insignificant.

**TABLE 2 Presidential Press Conference Activity, 1949–1996**

	Model E	Model F
Technology $t_{-1}$	-2.12 (-1.26)	0.15 (0.92)
Economic deterioration	-0.99 (-1.67)	-0.47 (-1.01)
Reputation $t_{-1}$	-0.09 (-0.55)	
Presidential approval	0.05 (0.47)	-0.04 (-0.40)
Divided government	-7.44* (-3.00)	-8.77* (-3.73)
Press Conferences $t_{-1}$	-0.07 (-0.52)	-0.08 (-0.58)
Reelection year	-1.97 (-0.77)	0.80 (0.41)
Trend	-0.38 (-1.21)	-0.88* (-3.62)
Bush	31.24* (6.62)	32.50* (5.09)
Clinton	28.50* (4.50)	26.63* (3.96)
Constant	27.81* (2.25)	42.44* (4.47)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.71	.69
SEE	6.44	6.66
Ljung-Box Q (12 lags)	18.83	13.67
L-M F-test (5 lags)	1.95	1.40
Joint F-test (presidency)	3.57	2.79
Joint F-test (president)	12.01*	11.87*
N	48	48

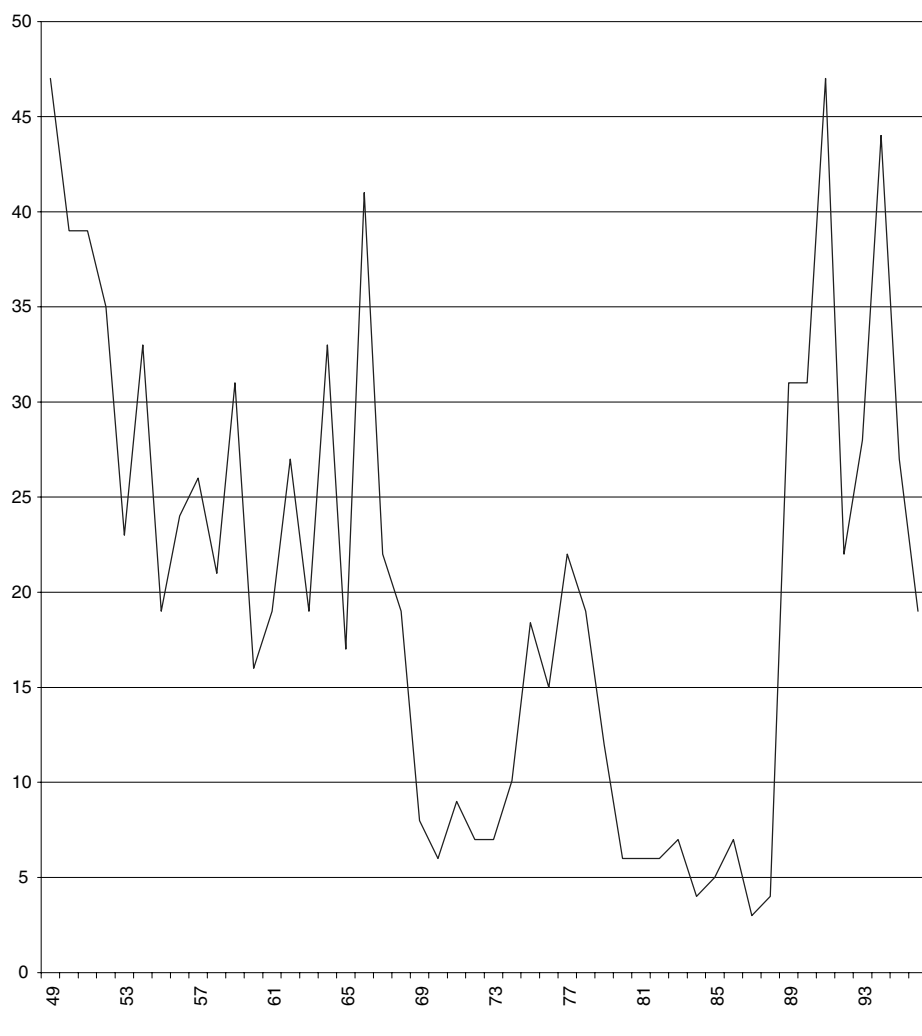
\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

Note: t-scores in parentheses. The trend variable is 1–48, for each year in the analysis. A recursive residuals test shows that the regression is stable. A significant joint F-test means that the dropped variables (those in parentheses) add explanatory power to the full or unrestricted model. In this instance, the full model is much better than the reduced presidency-centered model, but not statistically better than the reduced president-centered model.

Source: Compiled from data provided by Hager and Sullivan (1994) and updated by the author.

public strategy, this quantitative evidence also shows that press conference activity varies by administration, especially the most recent two. I demonstrate the robustness of my findings in Model F, where I use alternative measures of similar concepts modeled by Hager and Sullivan (1994).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the joint F-tests indicate that Bush

<sup>9</sup>These variables represent concepts similar to those theorized to affect press conferences, yet are operationalized differently. I model the percentage of households with cable television as technology. Because Hager and Sullivan's 1994 measure of the economy

**FIGURE 1 Presidential Press Conferences, 1949–1996**

and Clinton administration dummies explain variation in press conferences better than presidency-centered variables do.<sup>10</sup> Even though divided government contributes to fewer press conferences, these president-centered variables add more to the explanation of press conferences than presidency-centered variables do.

## Conclusion

Hager and Sullivan (1994, 1094) concluded that context explains press conferences, and individual presidents

(see Hibbs 1977) differs from other scholars' measures based on the administration's party (see Brody 1991), I model the change in the misery index for the economy. Third, I include all election years in my reelection variable.

<sup>10</sup>The results are stronger—and more generalizable—if I run F-tests against a full model that includes all presidential dummies and contextual variables.

have little influence over them. I have shown, however, that their results are questionable. I am unable to replicate their findings or produce reliable test results with their data. The updated models of presidential press conferences in Table 2 instead indicate that the president's "reputation" does not matter in the explanation of presidential press conferences. Divided government does predict fewer press conferences, but president-centered variables best explain the number of press conferences from Truman through Clinton's first term. Indeed, the significant Bush and Clinton dummy variables are evidence that the underlying logic of the presidency-centered thesis is flawed.

Presidential press conferences are more a function of individual preferences than the political environment. The influence of divided government on press conferences through 1996 indicates (see Figure 1), nevertheless, that the broader context can shape presidential decisions. Hence, the debate between president- and

presidency-centered theses may no longer be useful for framing explanations of presidential activity. Instead, efforts may be better spent identifying the extent to which presidents' personal preferences are constrained by contextual circumstances. Presidents make decisions, which is the essence of presidential governance. But even when they differ from others in their approaches to governing, presidents are still bound by an environment that constrains their options. It remains to be seen if future presidents will continue to give press conferences consistent with their own personal preferences or alter their behavior in response to the political environment. In the case of press conferences through 1996, it appears that individual presidents have more control over their decisions and are therefore less constrained by the political environment than they may be in other areas of presidential politics.

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