

A Watershed in White House Journalism: Explaining the Post-1968 Rise of Aggressive Presidential News

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Presidential journalism is known to have grown substantially more aggressive through the 1970s and beyond, but a definitive explanation for this trend remains elusive. Some suggest that events surrounding Vietnam and Watergate transformed the professional norms of journalism. However, the trend could also be a more superficial and transitory response to other circumstantial factors that converged in the same time period, such as president-level characteristics (the prevalence of Republicans, Washington outsiders, and more vigorous news management efforts), the political environment (the rise of official discord), and the economic environment (a downturn in the business cycle). This study disentangles these various factors and assesses their relative success in explaining trends in journalistic conduct in the postwar era. Data are drawn from a large sample of presidential news conferences from 1953 through 2000, focusing on the aggressiveness of journalists' questions. The results strongly support the normative shift hypothesis, although economic factors have also been consequential. These results suggest a punctuated equilibrium model of journalistic change in relations between the White House press corps and the presidency.

Keywords aggressive journalism, White House press corps, presidential news conferences, presidential press conferences, watchdog journalism

Sometime around the late 1960s, the tenor of Washington journalism began to change. A growing body of research converges in its portrayal of a shift toward increasingly vigorous and in some respects adversarial treatment of government officials, political candidates, and their policies. The general trend encompasses reporting on Congress (Robinson, 1981;

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Rozell, 1994), but has been most thoroughly documented in presidential news coverage. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, news stories about sitting presidents and presidential candidates became increasingly interpretive, negative, and skeptical of motives (Hallin, 1992; Patterson, 1993, 2000; Smoller, 1990; see also Brody, 1991). Correspondingly, direct interactions with the president in news conferences also became more contentious, with questions increasingly enterprising, direct, assertive, and adversarial toward the president (Clayman et al., 2006).

The scope and persistence of the trend suggests that journalistic norms underwent a fundamental change sometime in the post-1968 era, and both journalists (Broder, 1987, pp. 167–168; Cannon, 1977, pp. 289–293) and media scholars (Hallin, 1992; Patterson, 1993, pp. 78–80; cf. Schudson, 1992, pp. 111–112) have concluded as much. Given the historical circumstances, a “paradigm shift” in White House journalism is plausible. The Vietnam War, and in particular events such as the Tet offensive (early 1968), the secret bombing of Cambodia (begun in 1969 and made public in 1970), and the publication of the Pentagon Papers (1971), strained relations between the president and the White House press corps. This was, in turn, exacerbated by the Watergate affair and its aftermath (1972–1974). For many of these events, reporters had initially been complicit in presidential deceptions on major issues of public importance, but subsequently contributed to their exposure. One White House reporter, Lou Cannon of the *Washington Post*, characterized the resulting transformation of journalistic norms as one where “an attitude of basic trust that was tinged with skepticism was replaced with an attitude of suspicion in which trust occasionally intervened” (Cannon, p. 291). Accordingly, one hypothesis is that the political turbulence of the era led to a shift in journalistic norms, which should be evident in the treatment of the Nixon administration and Nixon’s successors.

However, the case for a normative “paradigm shift,” although plausible, is far from conclusive. A variety of circumstantial factors might have fostered more vigorous journalism without any fundamental shift in the underlying norms of the profession. Consider, first, *the rise of official discord*. It has been widely documented that dissent among political elites is consequential for patterns of news coverage, with news content becoming more diverse and more critical of official policy when officials themselves are in conflict (Hallin, 1984; Bennett, 1990; Sparrow, 1999). The mechanism underlying this association, according to Bennett’s “indexing hypothesis,” is that journalists index the range of opinion in the news to the range of opinion expressed among governing elites. Just as this has been used to refute another more narrowly focused paradigm shift hypothesis regarding news coverage of the Vietnam War (Hallin), it also challenges the reality of a paradigm shift in presidential news more generally. Since the Nixon administration began an extended period of divided government, and since Congress itself has become more polarized along party lines (Hetherington, 2001; Sinclair, 2006; Theriault, 2006), this might contribute to the post-1968 tenor of presidential news.

Just as the political environment supplies a plausible alternative explanation for journalistic trends, the *economic environment* does as well. Although the documented rise of more aggressive journalism occurred during a period of relative stability in the news media industry, the broader U.S. economy was entering an extended period of hard times. Moreover, multivariate models of news conference questioning have established robust links between levels of aggressiveness and the business cycle, with both the unemployment rate and the prime interest rate directly associated with aggressive questioning (Clayman et al., 2007). This association suggests that journalists routinely monitor presidential

performance with respect to the economy and that the persistent stagflation of the 1970s and early 1980s may also be a factor in more contentious president-press relations.

A more proximate set of explanations centers on presidents themselves, with *party affiliation* perhaps the most obvious factor to consider. The fact that U.S. journalists at the national level are disproportionately affiliated with the Democratic party (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991) has fostered the belief that news embodies a partisan bias favoring Democrats over Republicans. Attitudes do not necessarily affect actions, of course, and the vast body of content-analytic research taken together provides little evidence for systematic partisanship in the news (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Niven, 2001). Individual studies, however, do find support for a modest partisan tilt (Groeling, 2008; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005; Schiffer, 2006). Since Republicans have dominated the White House in the post-1968 era—Republicans held the presidency for 20 out of the next 24 years—this might also be a factor in coverage trends.

Presidents since 1968, in addition to being Republicans more often than Democrats, have also tended to be *Washington outsiders*. Although sitting vice presidents and legislators sometimes assume the presidency, most presidents in recent decades have come from the ranks of state governors. How this might bear on news coverage of the presidency is not entirely obvious. Since Washington outsiders are believed to be hampered in their capacity to negotiate with Congress (cf. Kernell, 1986), it is at least plausible that they might also face difficulties when dealing with the national news media. On the other hand, the novelty of coming from beyond the Beltway could be a source of strength in media relations. In any case, there are as yet no systematic studies of how insider/outsider status bears on presidential news.

Yet another president-centered explanation concerns not *who* presidents are but *what* they do, in particular their *public activities and news management efforts*. Various scholars suggest that officials and journalists compete for control over the agenda of public discourse, such that more vigorous efforts on one side prompt countermeasures on the other (Jones, 1992; Levy, 1981; Maltese, 1994; Patterson, 1993, pp. 77–78; Ponder, 1998; Sparrow, 1999). This suggests an *arms race hypothesis* for the post-1968 era. Just as vigorous Washington reporting during the Johnson administration prompted Nixon to create the Office of Director of Communications and to engage in more systematic news management efforts (Maltese), these efforts by Nixon and his successors may have fueled more aggressive reporting by journalists.

Finally, there is the possibility that *idiosyncratic reactions to particular presidents* might also account for post-1968 trends. It could be that the press has a particularly friendly or adversarial relationship with a given president for reasons unrelated to insider status, party affiliation, and so forth, and then reverts back to a prior baseline thereafter. Thus, John Kennedy is believed to have had extraordinarily friendly relations with the press corps because of his affinity for journalists and his personal comfort with the media spotlight. More relevant to the present study, Richard Nixon's awkwardness and dislike of the news media are believed to have hampered his relations with the press corps, while Gerald Ford is believed to have been burdened by his affiliation with Nixon, his decision to pardon the former president, and his nonelected status (Smith, 1990; Tebbel & Watts, 1985).

These various circumstantial factors—the changing character of presidents and the larger political/economic context—could account for the trend toward more aggressive journalism in the post-1968 era. There is also the possibility that the rise of aggressive journalism is a steady secular trend unrelated to any of these factors. All of this casts doubt on the reality of the normative shift hypothesis, since journalists' professional

norms may not have changed so much as the sociopolitical environment in which they are implemented. We have, then, a variety of alternative explanations for historical trends in news from the White House, as well as the post-Vietnam/Watergate explanation involving a transformation of journalistic norms.

While some studies acknowledge multiple explanatory factors (e.g., Hallin, 1992; Patterson, 1993), none have attempted to disentangle these various factors or assess their relative success in explaining trends in journalistic conduct in the postwar era. The present study tackles this problem by examining a large sample of presidential news conferences from 1953 through 2000. The study focuses on the phenomenon of aggressive questioning, using a multidimensional system for measuring the level of aggressiveness encoded in the questions that journalists ask of the president (Clayman & Heritage, 2002b; Clayman et al., 2006). We compare various political explanations of aggressive questioning after controlling for nonpolitical factors previously established as related to this behavior (Clayman et al., 2007).

This study proceeds from the assumption that news conference questioning provides a window into the culture of the White House press corps, albeit one that is empirically distinct from print and broadcast news stories. Patterns of questioning are not necessarily representative of story-based patterns of news coverage, although the fact (noted earlier) that historical trends in both domains have tended to run in parallel suggests that these forms of press behavior are not entirely disjunctive either. But representativeness aside, news conference questioning is itself a prominent mode of press behavior and hence worthy of study as a phenomenon in its own right. The news conference is a locus of direct encounters between the president and elite members of the press corps, one that is broadcast live and also receives substantial subsequent news coverage. Moreover, journalists' questions can influence the president's responses as well as subsequent news coverage, and may themselves be incorporated into quotations and soundbites (Clayman, 1990).

Methodology

Database and Sampling Procedure

The database begins in 1953, about when the era of public presidential news conferences began (Cornwell, 1965; Smith, 1990), and continues through 2000. This timeframe encompasses nine presidents from Eisenhower through Clinton, and spans the period during which journalism is believed to have shifted from relative deference to relative vigorousness.

Using transcripts reprinted in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, four conferences were sampled per year from 1953 to 2000. The conferences were staggered quarterly over the course of each year using February 1, April 1, July 1, and October 1 as starting dates; the first conference held after each date was selected. A temporally stratified sample was chosen to maximize the power to detect associations with time. Conferences held beyond White House grounds and those involving other officials in addition to the president were excluded from the sample. Twenty-eight of 192 quarters (15%) contained no presidential news conferences, so this sampling procedure yielded a database of 164 conferences and 4,608 distinct questions.

Dependent Variables: Measures of Aggressive Questioning

Clayman et al. (2006) conceptualized the phenomenon of aggressive questioning in terms of five constructs:

1. *Adversarialness*: The extent to which questions pursue an agenda in opposition to the president or his administration.
2. *Accountability*: The extent to which questions explicitly ask the president to justify his policies or actions.
3. *Assertiveness*: The extent to which questions invite a particular answer and are in that sense opinionated rather than neutral.
4. *Initiative*: The extent to which questions are enterprising rather than passive in their aims.
5. *Directness*: The extent to which questions are blunt rather than cautious in raising issues.

Previous research has shown that the first three measures exhibit substantial historical and contextual variation, whereas the last two measures are less contextually sensitive and historically variable (Clayman et al., 2006, 2007). Moreover, among the three contextually sensitive measures, the first two involve constructs that are more directly linked to aggression in capturing behaviors that are overtly challenging or oppositional. Accordingly, the present study uses measures of the first two constructs (adversarialness and accountability) as dependent variables.¹ Each measure is operationalized in terms of various features of question design that serve as indicators (see Table 1). Below is an outline of the measures and their indicators (for a fuller discussion, see Clayman & Heritage, 2002b; Clayman et al., 2006).

Adversarialness. An oppositional stance can be encoded (a) in the preface to the question only or (b) in the design of the question as a whole. Question prefaces were coded as adversarial if they disagreed with the president or were explicitly and strongly critical of the administration. Questions as a whole were coded as adversarial when an oppositional or critical posture ran through the question in its entirety. For instance, an adversarial preface may become the *focus of a subsequent question* that treats the preface as debatable (i.e., “You’ve been called reckless and irresponsible. What is your response to that?”). In such cases, the preface would be coded as adversarial but not the question as a whole. On the other hand, when the subsequent question *presupposes the truth of the preface*

Table 1
Dependent variables: Measures of aggressive questioning

Measure	Item (Indicator)	Description	Item values	Item kappa	Scale	Measure kappa
Adversarialness	Preface adversarialness	Q preface is oppositional	0: Nonadversarial preface 1: Adversarial preface focus of Q 2: Adversarial preface presupposed	0.79	Sum of two items	0.78
	Global adversarialness	Overall Q is oppositional	0: Not adversarial overall 1: Adversarial overall	0.66		
Accountability	Accountability questions	Q seeks explanation for administration policy	0: Not an accountability Q 1: “Why did you?” 2: “How could you?”	0.76	Single item	0.76

(i.e., “You’ve been called reckless and irresponsible. Don’t you think this will hurt your reelection campaign?”), both the preface and the question as a whole would be coded as adversarial.

Accountability. Accountability is operationalized as questions that explicitly ask the president to defend and justify his policies. Because such questions decline to accept policy at face value, they are to some extent aggressive, although the degree of aggressiveness depends on the linguistic form of the question. “Why did you. . .?” questions invite a justification without prejudice, whereas “How could you. . .?” questions are accusatory, implying an attitude of doubt or skepticism regarding the president’s capacity to adequately defend his actions. Note that accountability, unlike the other measures, has a single indicator: the occurrence of “Why did you. . .?”/“How could you. . .?” questions.

For the adversarialness measure, which involves multiple indicators, discrete indicators were combined into a single composite measure with higher values corresponding to more aggressive practices or multiple practices used in combination (see Clayman et al., 2006). We treated this composite measure as an ordinal variable, not assuming interval scale properties or a normal distribution. A test of the assumption of proportional odds confirmed that the levels of the scale covary over time and, hence, that a single underlying construct is indeed being measured ordinally throughout the scale. Furthermore, the underlying features of question design on which both scales are based were derived not intuitively but from prior research on question design in journalism and other contexts (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a).² This research demonstrates that specific design features are indeed understood and treated by interactants themselves as embodying aggressiveness in various forms. The scales are thus validated both as constructs and as indicators of aggressiveness per se.

As for reliability, the question analysis system has the advantage of encompassing not only content but also formal aspects of question design. Coding was performed by a team of 14 coders working in pairs, with decisions requiring consensus and problem cases resolved in weekly meetings involving the entire research team. Reliability was assessed by a joint recoding of a subsample of 10 conferences, and evaluated using Cohen’s kappa. Kappa scores exceeded .75 for both composite measures, which is generally understood to indicate at least 90% agreement (and even greater agreement for coding categories with few codes; see Bakeman et al., 1997).

Independent Variables: Measures of Political Context

We examined eight measures that corresponded to hypotheses of political determinants of journalistic behavior. *Party affiliation* was operationalized as Democratic or Republican. *Insider/outsider* status was operationalized by defining Washington insiders as those who had previously been vice presidents or members of the House or Senate, and outsiders as everyone else. Presidential efforts to control the agenda of discussion were examined (following Kernell, 1986) through four measures of presidents’ public activities: (a) *major speeches* broadcast nationwide per year, (b) *news conferences* per year, (c) *total domestic public activities* per year (including major speeches and news conferences, as well as minor speeches, Washington appearances, and appearances elsewhere in the U.S.), and (d) *total foreign public activities* per year (data from Ragsdale, 2009).

As for the larger political context, two measures of elite discord were examined, namely (a) *extent of divided government* and (b) *party polarization* in Congress. The extent of divided government was operationalized using three ordinal categories (both houses of Congress controlled by the president’s party, one house Democrat-controlled and the other

Republican-controlled, or both houses controlled by the opposing party). Party polarization was measured using Poole and Rosenthal's (1997) DW-NOMINATE scores for members of Congress. DW-NOMINATE, which is based on all nonunanimous roll call votes taken in each Congress, is the most commonly used measure of legislators' ideological positions. Using these scores, Hetherington (2001) measured the term-by-term level of party polarization in the House of Representatives since 1949 by calculating the mean DW-NOMINATE score for members of each party and calculating the weighted Euclidian distance between them. We incorporate Hetherington's metric into our analysis.

Table 2 summarizes these measures of political context, which were averaged over presidential administrations for the purposes of graphical illustration.

Contextual Covariates

As noted earlier, Clayman et al. (2007) developed a multivariate ordinal logistic regression model of these modes of aggressive questioning based on various social conditions. The final such model predicted questioning behavior from the unemployment rate, the prime interest rate, a foreign policy topic indicator, a second term indicator, and the time of the press conference. The first four of these factors serve as covariates here in multivariate models predicting the two measures of aggressive behavior.

Graphical Comparison of Temporal Trends in Political Context and Aggressive Questioning

To understand whether various aspects of the political context can plausibly account for temporal trends in press behavior, we graphically compared the historical trends in these measures and in administration-level adjusted measures of aggressive journalistic behavior. Graphs summarize the measures by administration because many of the political variables are invariant within administrations (e.g., party affiliation of president) or must be summed over long periods for stable measurement properties (e.g., congressional polarization).

Table 2
Measures of political context

Hypothesis	Measure
Partisan bias	Republican indicator
Insider/Outsider bias	Outsider indicator (President not a former vice president or member of Congress)
Arms race for agenda control	National speeches per year News conferences per year Domestic public activities per year Foreign public activities per year
Elite discord	Extent of divided government (Concordance of congressional control with presidential party affiliation) Congressional polarization (DW-NOMINATE)

Statistical Models of Time Trends in Aggressive Questioning

We model each measure of aggressive behavior in a series of multivariate ordinal logistic regression models, one series for each outcome measure. Model 1 in each series predicts the outcome only from the four contextual covariates described above. This constitutes a baseline model that measures only the effect of contextual covariates, with no time trend beyond those in those covariates. It will serve as a reference point to index the explanatory power of alternative representations of time trends. Models 2–4 in each series include a measure of time plus the set of four contextual covariates described above. Model 2 in each series enters the time of the press conference in a simple linear form. This constitutes a reference time-trend model that corresponds to the null hypothesis that there is a rise in aggressiveness, but that it represents a linear secular trend unrelated to presidents, political contexts, or historical eras (after considering contextual covariates).

To test the normative shift hypothesis, a dichotomous variable was constructed for conferences held before (0) and after (1) Nixon's 1969 inauguration. This measure of time assesses the extent to which time trends in aggressiveness are well described as nearly unchanged during 1953–1968, substantially increasing in 1969, and substantially unchanged from that new more aggressive level during 1969–2000. The choice of the Nixon administration as the change point was based on general historical accounts plus our own prior analysis of raw historical trends in aggressive questioning over the same time period (Clayman et al., 2006). In Model 3 of each series, this measure of time takes the place of the linear time measure of Model 2.

Model 4 in each series parameterizes time as a series of eight administration indicators (with Nixon omitted as a reference category). This considerably less parsimonious model (8 predictor degrees of freedom for time as compared to 1 each in Models 2 and 3) allows press behavior to vary independently for each administration and was designed to represent the near “maximum” fitting of journalist behavior to time trends. As such, we compare Models 2 and 3 in terms of the proportion of temporal variation captured by Model 4 above and beyond what is explained by covariates alone (Model 1). Model 4 results are also displayed graphically in order to compare administration-level trends in aggressive journalistic behavior with the six administration-level measures of political context. All analyses were performed using Stata 9.0 (Stata Corporation, 2005).

Results

Time Patterning of Political Context Measures

Our eight measures of presidents and political context are conceived as covarying temporal patterns that offer potential explanations for patterns of press behavior. These series are graphed in pairs in Figures 1 through 4, which contain historical trends for elite discord, presidential public activities, and presidential attributes. As can be seen in Figure 1, divided government shows cyclical patterns being highest in the Eisenhower, Nixon, and Clinton administrations, whereas congressional polarization rose slightly with the Kennedy administration, held steady until the Reagan administration, and rose slightly in each of the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations successively. If these were the most important political factors in determining aggressive questioning after controlling for contextual covariates, we would expect aggressive behavior to exhibit a cyclical but non-increasing pattern or an increasing trend that primarily began with the Reagan administration.

As shown in Figure 2, there is no strong long-term trend for news conferences or major speeches per year to increase from 1953 to 2000. It is also apparent that within

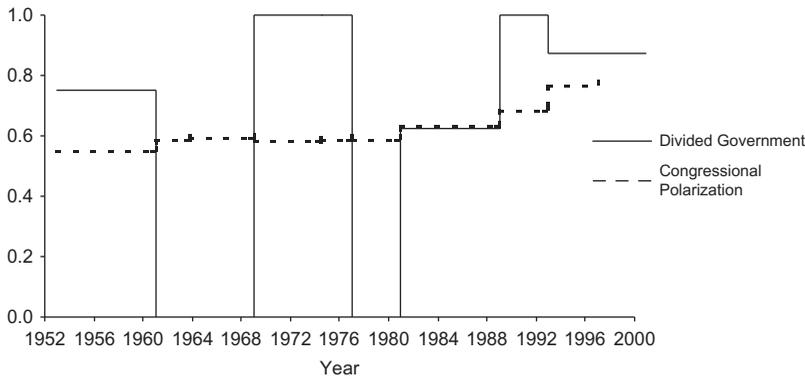


Figure 1. Divided government and congressional polarization, by administration. For 1997–2001, congressional polarization data were not available.

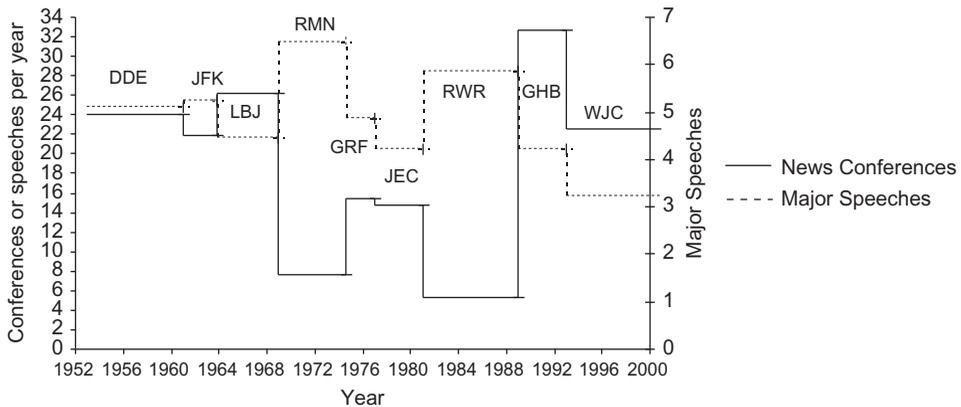


Figure 2. News conferences and major speeches per year, by administration.

administration, news conferences and major speeches per year are negatively correlated, with Nixon and Reagan giving far more speeches than news conferences and Bush and Clinton exhibiting the opposite pattern. The arms race hypothesis would predict the most aggressive questioning for Nixon and Reagan, with reduced aggression directed toward Bush and Clinton. A “satisficing” hypothesis would make similar predictions.

As can be seen in Figure 3, there is a trend toward increasing domestic public activities, though the trend is not monotonic. During the Nixon administration, there was a sharp drop in the average number of domestic public activities followed by an increase during the Ford administration, which in turn was followed by a decline for the Carter and Reagan administrations. Since then, the trend has been upward, with only the Clinton administration exceeding the previous high of the Ford administration. The average number of foreign public activities fluctuated without an overall trend between the Eisenhower and Bush administrations, with only the Clinton administration exceeding the previous range.

Figure 4 displays the political affiliation and insider/outsider status of each president. Regardless of whether one hypothesized more aggressive behavior for either party affiliation or for greater or lesser association with Washington, D.C., the absence of a directional long-term trend in party affiliation or outsider status would predict cyclical rather than steadily increasing trends in aggressive questioning.

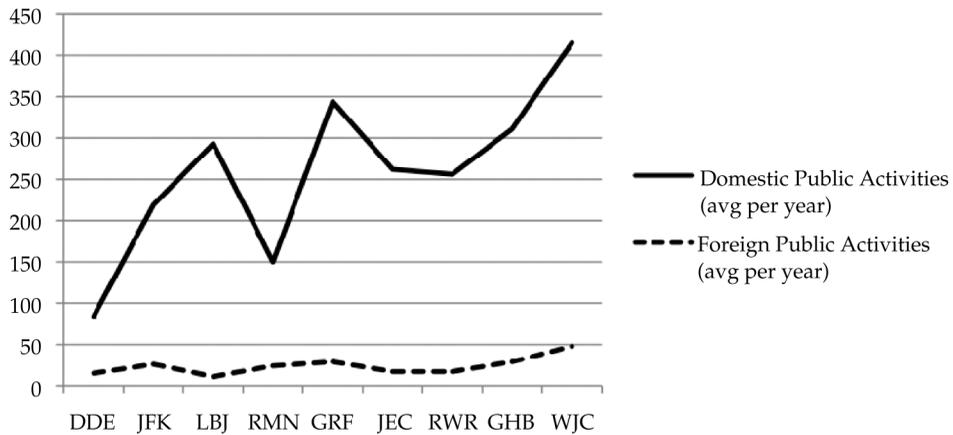


Figure 3. Total domestic and foreign public activities per year, by administration.

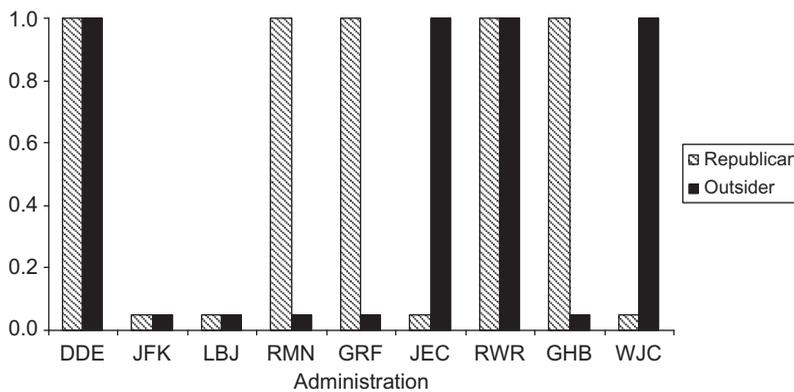


Figure 4. Republican and outsider indicators.

In sum, of these political explanations, only congressional polarization and domestic public activities predict even a general upward trend from 1953 to 2000 (for the latter, an upward trend was largely isolated to 1981–2000), and none of them predict a punctuated change.

Modeling Temporal Patterns in the Post-1968 Rise in Aggressive Press Behavior Toward Presidents

Tables 3 and 4 show the full set of multivariate models using different parameterizations of time. In each table, the four columns correspond to the four series of ordered logistic regression models with Model 1 containing contextual covariates only and Models 2, 3, and 4 adding three different representations of time to the contextual covariates: linear time, a 1968 shift, and a full set of indicators for each administration, respectively. Table entries are logistic regression coefficients, which are the log-odds of being above rather than below any given cut-point on the ordinal measure of aggressive behavior associated with a one-unit change in a given predictor, controlling for all others. In the case of Model 4, coefficients contrast each administration with the average of all administrations from

Table 3
Ordinal Logistic Regression of Adversarialness

	Model 1: Contextual covariates only	Model 2: CC + linear time	Model 3: CC + 1968 shift	Model 4: CC + administration indicators
Percentage of administration-level variance captured, beyond covariates	0	66***	96***	100***
Coefficients (Log odds)				
Covariates				
Prime	0.08* (0.01)	0.05** (0.02)	0.03* (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Unemployment	0.20*** (0.03)	0.20*** (0.03)	0.17*** (0.03)	0.17** (0.05)
Foreign	-0.92*** (0.10)	-0.92*** (0.10)	-0.91*** (0.10)	-0.92*** (0.10)
Second term	0.65*** (0.11)	0.52*** (0.12)	0.61*** (0.11)	0.54*** (0.14)
Time variables				
Per year (Linear time)		0.02*** (< 0.01)		
Post-1968 indicator			0.88*** (0.16)	
Presidents ^a				
Eisenhower				-0.81** (0.23)
Kennedy				-1.02** (0.33)
Johnson				-0.87* (.0.34)
Nixon				[REF]
Ford				-0.09 (0.25)
Carter				-0.01 (0.24)
Reagan				0.10 (0.28)
Bush				0.06 (0.22)
Clinton				0.09 (0.20)
Intercepts				
Cut 1	3.72 (0.21)	42.69 (8.42)	3.84 (0.22)	2.91 (0.37)
Cut 2	4.21 (0.21)	43.19 (8.42)	4.33 (0.23)	3.41 (0.38)
Cut 3	4.51 (0.22)	43.49 (8.42)	4.64 (0.23)	3.71 (0.38)
Cut 4	5.46 (0.23)	44.44 (8.42)	5.58 (0.24)	4.66 (0.39)

^aReference group for president coefficients is the average of all presidents 1953–2000; $p < .001$ for block test of president terms.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 4
Ordinal Logistic Regression of Accountability

	Model 1: Contextual covariates only	Model 2: CC + linear time	Model 3: CC + 1968 shift	Model 4: CC + administration indicators
Percentage of administration-level variance captured, beyond covariates	0	44***	64***	100***
Coefficients (Log odds)				
Covariates				
Prime	0.05* (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.07* (0.03)
Unemployment	0.18*** (0.04)	0.18*** (0.05)	0.14** (0.05)	0.05 (0.07)
Foreign	-0.52*** (0.13)	-0.51*** (0.13)	-0.50*** (0.13)	-0.57*** (0.14)
Second term	0.41** (0.15)	0.25 (0.16)	0.35* (0.16)	0.16 (0.21)
Time variables				
Per year (Linear time)		0.02*** (0.01)		
Post-1968 indicator			1.10*** (0.23)	
Presidents ^a				
Eisenhower				-0.98** (0.33)
Kennedy				-1.43** (0.51)
Johnson				-0.97* (0.45)
Nixon				[REF]
Ford				0.01 (0.37)
Carter				0.42 (0.33)
Reagan				0.88* (0.39)
Bush				0.60* (0.29)
Clinton				0.11 (0.29)
Intercepts				
Cut 1	4.19 (0.28)	53.19 (11.67)	4.31 (0.31)	2.48 (0.52)
Cut 2	6.04 (0.32)	55.05 (11.67)	6.17 (0.34)	4.34 (0.54)

^aReference group for president coefficients is the average of all presidents 1953–2000; $p < .001$ for block test of president terms.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

1953 to 2000. In the series of models, we conceive of Model 1 (contextual covariates only) as a base model and of Model 4 (contextual covariates plus a separate intercept for each administration) as a gold standard. The top row of each table summarizes the proportion of Model 4’s administration-level variance captured by the time variables in Models 2 and 3 beyond the contextual covariates.

Table 3 models adversarialness. As noted by Clayman et al. (2007), adversarialness was positively associated with both the prime interest rate and unemployment, was higher in presidents’ second terms, and was lower for questions related to foreign policy in Model 1 ($p < .001$ for all). In Model 2, a significant positive linear trend in time, with an odds ratio of $\exp(0.02) = 1.02$ per year or $1.02^{10} = 1.22$ per 10 years ($p < .001$), accounts for 66% of the total Model 4 variance in time. The 1968 shift in Model 3, however, which suggests post-1968 odds of adversarialness almost 2.5 times ($\exp[0.88] = 2.41$) as high as what was seen from 1953 to 1968 ($p < .001$), accounts for a full 96% of the Model 4 variance in time. The administration coefficients for Model 4 are also displayed graphically in Figure 5.

Table 4 models accountability. As noted by Clayman et al. (2007), accountability was positively associated with both the prime interest rate ($p < .05$) and unemployment ($p < .001$), was higher in presidents’ second terms ($p < .01$), and was lower for questions related to foreign policy in Model 1 ($p < .001$). In Model 2, a significant positive linear trend in time, with an odds ratio of 1.02 per year or 1.22 per 10 years ($p < .001$), accounts for 44% of the total Model 4 variance in time. The 1968 shift in Model 3, however, which suggests post-1968 odds of accountability 3.00 times as high as what was seen from 1953 to 1968 ($p < .001$), accounts for 64% of the Model 4 variance in time. The administration coefficients for Model 4 are also displayed graphically in Figure 6.

Given that 1969 seems to be a watershed moment for both dimensions of aggressiveness, how stable was journalistic conduct in the periods before and after this apparent turning point? For adversarialness, there were no significant differences by administration within either of the two periods defined by the 1969 turning point ($p > .05$ for each). For accountability, there was no significant variation by administration within the pre-1969 interval, but there was significant variation within the post-1968 interval. Specifically, Reagan and Bush experienced greater accountability than the post-1968 average, whereas Ford experienced less accountability than the post-1968 average ($p < .05$ for each).

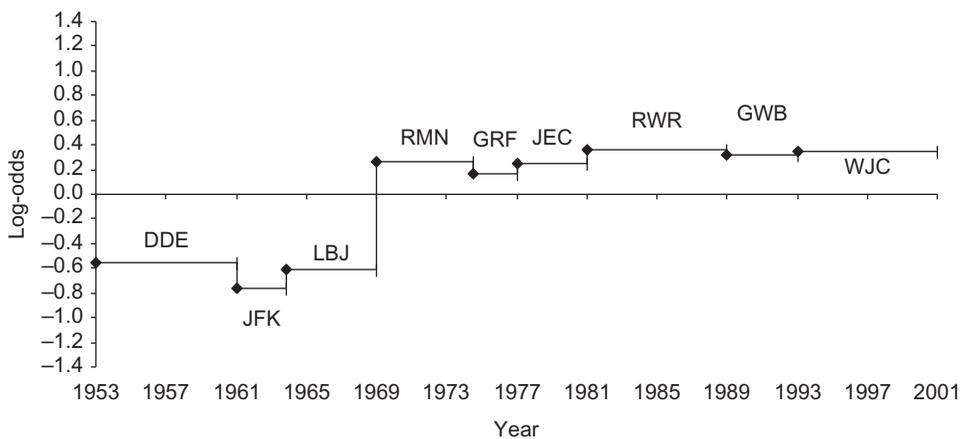


Figure 5. Adjusted log-odds of adversarialness by administration, relative to 1953–2000 average.

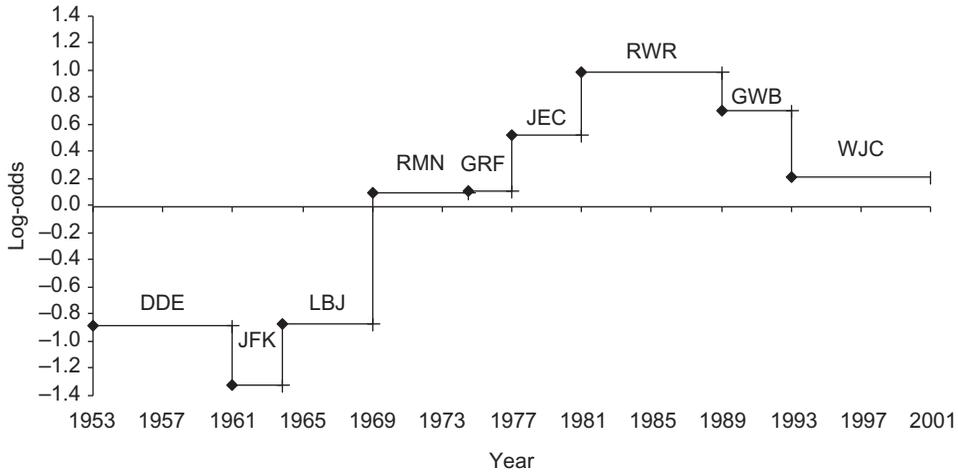


Figure 6. Adjusted log-odds of accountability by administration, relative to 1953–2000 average.

Discussion

In summary, vigorous journalism in the form of adversarial questions (which pursue an agenda in opposition to the president) and accountability questions (which require presidents to defend and justify their policies) increased sharply during the Nixon administration and remained at levels not seen before 1969 for each of the next five presidents who followed. For the case of adversarial questions, that single turning point almost completely explains variations in journalistic behavior toward presidents across nearly five decades that were not explained by contextual covariates. For the case of accountability questions, evidence suggests a further transitory increase that peaked under Reagan and subsequently returned to the level seen immediately post-Nixon. No president-level attributes or measures of political discord exhibit this pattern of punctuated change.

These results offer strong support for the post-1968 normative shift hypothesis relative to competing political explanations for the rise of aggressive White House journalism. Although the state of the economy, as embodied in higher unemployment and interest rates, also played a role (Clayman et al., 2007), when economic and other background conditions are controlled the normative shift hypothesis retains considerable explanatory power. A single post-1968 paradigm shift can account for 64% (for accountability questions) to 96% (for adversarial questions) of the variance in vigorous questioning. Furthermore, the decades before and after this turning point were for the most part internally stable and thus represent consistently distinct eras in the conduct of White House journalism.

The failure of the partisan bias, arms race, and official discord explanations invites further discussion given the scholarly prominence of these factors. Regarding partisanship, the present findings converge with the majority of empirical research studies demonstrating that partisan bias is neither widespread nor substantial in U.S. news (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). Given the paucity of hard evidence on this issue, the persistence of partisan bias claims in popular discourse on the news appears to be a product of perception more than reality. As research on the “hostile media phenomenon” has demonstrated (i.e., Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), there is a general tendency for partisan observers on both sides to perceive the same news content as slanted against their views. The present

study suggests that when such content is subjected to systematic analysis and when other relevant conditions are controlled, partisanship retains little if any explanatory power (see also Clancey & Robinson, 1985; Niven, 2001; Schiffer, 2006). Presidents have not always been treated in a perfectly balanced manner, of course. In our data, Reagan experienced greater demands for accountability than the post-1968 average, while Ford and Bush were less apt to be held accountable. But such differences, rather than following a clear partisan pattern, are minimal and idiosyncratic, and larger differences in the treatment of presidents are better explained by economic conditions and evolving journalistic norms.

The official/journalist arms race and official discord explanations are also unsupported by the present findings, although for these explanations the implications are perhaps less clear. While our measure of presidents' party affiliation precisely captures the objective reality, our measures of presidents' public activities and official discord are less definitive. Most notably, official discord rises and falls not only at gross levels of divided government and overall congressional polarization, but also at the finer-grained level of actual episodes of congressional debate on specific issues, and there is evidence that issue-specific levels of debate are indeed consequential for corresponding news (Bennett, 1990; Hallin, 1986; Zaller & Chiu, 1996). But while the political condition measures used in this study are calibrated at a relatively coarse level of granularity, so is the broad historical trend that we are seeking to explain, and it is noteworthy that none of these measures satisfactorily account for the post-1968 trend.

The image of presidential journalism emerging from this research is, if not quite ideal, at least somewhat encouraging. The historic rise of a more vigorous White House press corps was not driven by elite factionalism, inside-the-Beltway clubbiness, or partisan bias. It appears to be a product of (a) a heightened skepticism of the president in the face of Vietnam/Watergate-era abuses and (b) a more general propensity to monitor presidential performance with respect to the economy and to modulate news coverage accordingly. Does this mean that the independent watchdog role in journalism, which had been relatively dormant in earlier decades, was reinvigorated in the post-1968 era? This is debatable, given that investigative reporting in the Woodward/Bernstein mode remained the exception rather than the rule in U.S. journalism (Schudson, 1982) and that journalism continues to fall short of the watchdog ideal in other ways (Patterson, 1993). On the other hand, the transformation documented here cannot be dismissed as merely stylistic or superficial, for it had nontrivial and enduring consequences for journalistic conduct toward the president. In their most visible and direct encounters with presidents, journalists became markedly less inclined to accept presidential pronouncements and policies at face value, and they grew more inclined to challenge presidents and hold them accountable for their actions. And this transformation has endured for at least three decades.

This examination of journalism across a half-century strongly suggests a punctuated equilibrium model of journalistic change.³ Such a model invites explanation not only for infrequent and localized change episodes, but also for the predominance of stability. White House reporters, like other institutional actors, exhibit more uniformity in behavior than would be predicted by a purely individualistic, choice-driven theory of action. Their procedural choices with respect to question design are stabilized by a variety of factors, including (a) general professional norms and values such as neutrality and adversarialness (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a, 2002b), (b) specialized norms and conventions of the White House press corps and presidential news conferences, (c) the relative constancy of press corps membership resulting from low turnover among White House correspondents, and (d) the fact that all news conference conduct is discharged in the presence of other members of the press corps. The last factor—the mutual observability of questioning

practices—contributes to the emergence of a shared culture of questioning and socializes new members of the press corps by providing cues as to what forms of behavior are appropriate. The cumulative result of these factors is convergence on a mean level of vigorousness in questions to the president. Although there is variation around this mean, which is modulated in relation to certain transitory conditions (the business cycle, foreign versus domestic question content, first versus second terms), it is otherwise remarkably stable and exhibits substantial inertia over time.

This level of aggressiveness has, however, undergone one nontransitory and disjunctive “reset” coinciding with the turbulence of the post-1968 era. Pinpointing the specific historical events that triggered this reset must await future research with a denser sample of news conferences, although likely candidates are Vietnam and Watergate-related presidential abuses that undermined journalistic trust in the president. If such incidents had been fewer or less significant, perhaps they would have yielded only a transitory upswing in vigorous questioning practices. In combination, however, such events appear to have led White House reporters toward a more fundamental reconsideration of their proper role. Thus, much like the early-20th-century rise of objectivity (Kaplan, 2002; Schudson, 1978), the late-20th-century invigoration of journalism appears to have been motivated by developments external to journalism itself, developments centered in the political institutions that journalists are professionally obliged to monitor (see also Cook, 1998). It is also possible that still wider causal mechanisms may have played a role, since a similar shift is evident in the journalism of many countries other than the U.S. (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), although the influence of American journalism elsewhere cannot be ruled out.

If external developments were the main catalysts for this shift, other developments within journalism may have further contributed to its spread and staying power. Consider a parallel stylistic change within journalism, namely the shift away from the earlier descriptive and formally “objective” style and toward a more analytical and interpretive style (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997; Hallin, 1992; Patterson, 1993; Schudson, 1982). This broad stylistic shift has an analogue in news conference questioning in the shift from simple unelaborated questions toward questions that incorporate evaluative or opinionated statement prefaces (Clayman & Heritage, 2002b; Clayman et al., 2006). This general stylistic innovation, which appears to have originated prior to the post-1968 watershed, provided the discursive space that enabled journalists to express their invigorated watchdog inclinations not only in occasional investigative articles on momentarily newsworthy events, but on a more regular basis regarding the routine workings of “politics as usual.”

Given the post-1968 watershed, have there been other normative shifts? At least in the case of White House news conferences in the half-century covered by this study, apparently not. The Reagan administration capped a temporary upswing in vigorous questioning, but this shift was both narrow (limited to only one of the dimensions of aggressiveness examined) and short-lived, with no enduring impact on the norms of the profession. In more recent years beyond the timeframe of this study, popular commentators (e.g., Boehlert, 2006) have argued that the events of 9/11 led to a normative shift in the opposite direction, that is, a collapse of journalistic vigor. However, informal impressions of a journalistic “fall from grace” have yet to be tested systematically, and the magnitude, scope, and duration of any such shift remain unknown. The present study provides a model for how such a test might be undertaken.

If we broaden the historical scope, and look beyond vigorous questioning to other dimensions of journalistic practice, it is clear that a variety of paradigm-shifting historical moments have long been recognized by media scholars. These include the shift from

editorial commentary to reportage in the 1830s (Schudson, 1978) and the rise of objectivity around the turn of the 20th century (Kaplan, 2002; Schudson). The invigoration of journalism in the Vietnam/Watergate era may now safely be added to this pantheon of significant turning points in the development of U.S. journalism.

Notes

1. The other contextually sensitive measure, assertiveness, was also tested but yielded insignificant results that did not track with the other measures. This confirms our sense that the assertiveness measure is conceptually distinct from both adversarialness and accountability.

2. For a review of this extensive literature, see Clayman et al. (2006, p. 32).

3. Such a model is implicit in neo-institutionalism, and it has occasionally emerged explicitly in accounts of the chronological patterning of institutional change (e.g., Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Robinson, 2004; True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 1999). The neo-institutionalist approach has been fruitfully applied to journalism in recent years (Cook, 1998, 2006; Kaplan, 2002, 2006; Ryfe, 2006), although not with respect to long-term trends in the contemporary era.

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