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Pressuring the President: Changing language practices and the growth of political accountability☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines two historical trends in practices of questioning deployed across a half-century (1953–2000) of U.S. presidential news conferences (164 conferences, 4608 questions): (1) the decline of conventionally indirect question forms, and (2) the rise of negative interrogatives as a polar question format. Both trends show journalists to be exerting increasing pressure on presidents over time but they differ in the nature of that pressure, with the decline of indirectness involving pressure to answer the question at all, and the rise of negative interrogatives involving pressure to answer in a particular way (affirmatively). Both trends have been noted in previous research, but here we take a closer look at how they differ in the pace of change over time, and their varying sensitivity to the exogenous sociopolitical landscape. Among conventionally indirect question frames, contrasting trendlines for "ability" versus "willingness" frames are also examined. All of these language-practice trends span the era of the public questioning of presidents and are thus implicated in mechanisms of governmental accountability.
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1. Introduction

Scholars of governing systems have long been concerned with the nature of political power and its implementation. An important element of this concern has centered on the variety of mechanisms that may constrain the exercise of authority, constraints that are referred to under the rubric of *political accountability*. Such constraints may be embodied horizontally through systems of checks and balances between political actors and agencies, or vertically through non-governmental actors including ordinary citizens and an independent news media (Cater, 1959; Schedler, 1999). This paper considers an aspect of vertical constraint in the U.S. context, when journalists in presidential news conferences raise topics concerning past and future presidential action and exert pressure on presidents to address those topics, with the hope and expectation that they will do so with candor. These journalistic endeavors in direct encounters with presidents have not been constant, but rather have varied in intensity over time. Questioning in presidential news conferences has grown more vigorous and adversarial, suggesting an expansion of journalism as an agent of political accountability in the U.S. context. In this paper, we examine changes in features of question design that have conduced toward this outcome.

Our previous research has documented upward trends in the overall growth in more vigorous questioning of presidents. In news conference encounters, questions to the president have grown more substantively oppositional, while also employing linguistic practices that place greater pressure and constraint on presidential responses (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b;

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Clayman et al., 2006). This was demonstrated through a relatively complex coding system comprised of five major dimensions and a dozen practice-based indicators. A number of these indicators were shown to fluctuate in relation to the socioeconomic context (unemployment and interest rates), the life-cycle of presidential administrations (first versus second terms in office), and question content (domestic versus foreign affairs and national security). Other indicators however displayed a relatively uniform trend that was less sensitive to contextual or other exogenous factors (Clayman et al., 2007; Clayman et al., 2010).

In this paper we take a more granular look at two trends in practices of questioning, which both have the effect of increasing the pressure on the president for response. The first is a decline in the use of conventionally indirect question forms (e.g., *Can I ask …*, *Will you tell us …*) as a question design format. The second is the rapid rise of negative interrogatives as a polar question format. Both trends entail an increase in more vigorous presidential interrogation over time, and they operate not at the level of referential or topical content but rather through formal question-design features that exert social pressure on response. Although indirect question forms have declined in frequency and negative interrogatives have risen, the two trends converge in the growth of this pressure over time and, to this extent, ratchet up an aspect of presidential accountability. In the case of declining conventional indirectness, the pressure involves a ratcheting up of the obligation to answer the question being posed. In the case of rising negative interrogatives by contrast, the pressure is to answer in a particular way (affirmatively). Moreover, both trends are distinctive in that unlike other practices that have undergone shifts in relative frequency, these changes implicate near-absolute transformations in the repertoire of questioning practices available to White House journalists over time. Such transformations in the journalistic toolkit have ramifications for evolving relations between journalists and presidents.

In looking more closely at these convergent trends in question design, we disaggregate the separate and distinct practices that underly them and explore a number of novel empirical findings. These include the following.

1) Conventionally indirect question forms, taken together, exhibit a highly stable rate of decline over time. This rate of decline remains relatively consistent across more than four decades regardless of changes in presidential administrations, party dominance of the executive, the business cycle, and so on. Accordingly, the long-term trend from indirect to direct question forms is remarkably insensitive to developments in the exogenous sociopolitical context.
2) Among indirect question forms that are self-referencing, *I wonder …* frames stand out as far more frequent than either desire statements (*I would like/want to ask …*) or requests for permission (*Can/May I ask …*). Requests for permission (*Can/May I ask …*) were strongly associated with follow-up questions that pursue the previous question.
3) Among indirect question forms that are other-referencing, those referencing the president's ability to respond (*Can/Could you …*) stand out as far more frequent than those referencing willingness to respond (*Will/Would you …*).
4) Self- and other-referencing forms exhibited somewhat distinct patterns of decline. Self-referencing forms declined more in the early years of our sampling period, while other-referencing forms declined more steadily and extendedly across four decades.
5) Negative interrogative questions, by contrast with conventionally indirect forms, exhibit a more dynamic pattern of change over time, with growth notably concentrated in the post-Nixon era of the late 1970s onward (cf., Clayman et al., 2010).
6) Negative interrogatives were increasingly associated with prefatory statements that added to the pressure for agreement, and were also increasingly associated with adversarial content. The growth of prefaced negative interrogatives was similarly concentrated in the post-Nixon era.

It bears emphasis that trends in the use of both conventional indirectness and negative interrogatives index a common development in press–state relations: namely an expanding entitlement on the part of the White House press corps to impose communicative obligations on the chief executive in the interest of public accountability.

2. Background[1]

2.1. Presidential news conferences

As we have suggested previously (Clayman et al., 2006), presidential news conferences are a perspicuous setting for the examination of the evolution of language practices in relation to institutional and sociopolitical change. The news conference became fully public and "on the record" in the early 1950s (Cornwell, 1965; Smith 1990). Since then it has been remarkably stable in format and style, including the range of participants, their physical arrangement, and the organizing turn taking system and participation framework. Variations in these arrangements have been minor and infrequent (Cillizza, 2015; Schegloff 1987: 224–225).

In addition, the local sequential context of action is minimized as a factor in question design (Clayman et al., 2006). Within a Q-A participation framework, multiple journalists are in competition to ask each next question. This limits most to a single questioning turn and encourages the preparation of questions in advance, thereby yielding a succession of question-response sequences that are disjoined from one another. Hence the prior sequential context is largely irrelevant to the analysis of question-design variations and trends. Exceptions to this general pattern (i.e., follow-up questions) are infrequent and can be readily identified and controlled (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b).

[1] This presentation of the background to this project draws on several of our previous publications (most centrally Clayman et al., 2006, 2007).

Accordingly, the presidential news conference is the kind of structured and stable situation from which actions (i.e., questions) may be extracted and examined for their intrinsic design features, subjected to comparative analysis, and also used in studies of exogenous processes of historical change (Clayman and Heritage, 2021).

2.2. Sampling procedure and database

This study encompasses the administrations of Eisenhower through Clinton, a timeframe whose beginning coincides with the era of the public news conference. Earlier news conferences were essentially private encounters between presidents and journalists, although the default assumption that remarks were "off the record" could be overturned upon request (Cornwell, 1965; Smith, 1990). The prohibition against quotation was relaxed significantly during the Truman administration (1947–1952) but it was not until Eisenhower that the news conference became fully public and subject to verbatim quotation, full attribution, and radio and television broadcast.

Using transcripts reprinted in *Public Papers of the Presidents*, as described in (Clayman et al., 2006), four conferences were sampled per year from 1953 to 2000. These were staggered quarterly; using February 1, April 1, July 1, and October 1 as starting dates, the first conference held thereafter was selected. A temporally stratified sample was chosen on the grounds that president–press relations are believed to be cyclical in nature, with an initial honeymoon period followed by more aggressive treatment (Brody 1991; Smoller 1990). Conferences held beyond White House grounds, and those involving other officials in addition to the president, were excluded from the data sample. Since no conferences were held in 28 quarters, this sampling procedure yielded a database of 164 conferences and 4608 distinct questions.

2.3. The coding system for questions

The question analysis system, a revised version of that developed in (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b), decomposes the phenomenon of aggressive journalistic questioning into five component dimensions (Clayman et al., 2006).

1. *Initiative* - the extent to which questions are enterprising rather than passive
2. *Directness* - the extent to which questions exert pressure to answer
3. *Assertiveness* - the extent to which polar (yes/no) questions exert pressure toward either an affirming or rejecting answer
4. *Adversarialness* - the extent to which questions pursue an agenda in opposition to the president or administration
5. *Accountability* – the extent to which questions explicitly ask the president to explain and defend actions

For each dimension, the practice-based indicators and reliability scores are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
The question analysis coding system (from Clayman et al., 2006).

Dimension	Indicator	Description	Values	Kappa	
Initiative	Statement Prefaces	Q preceded by statement(s)	0 No preface 1 Preface	0.93	0.93
	Multiple Questions	2+ Qs in a single turn at talk	0 Single Q 1 Multiple Qs	0.99	
	Follow-up Questions	Subsequent Q by the same journalist	0 Not a follow-up Q 1 Follow-up Q	0.71	
Directness[a]	Absence of Other-Referencing Frames	Frame refers to ability or willingness to answer	0 No frame 1 *Can/Could you …* 2 *Will/Would you …*	0.88	0.87
	Absence of Self-Referencing Frames	Frame refers to journalist's intent or desire to ask	0 No frame 1 *I wonder* 2 *I'd like to ask …* 3 *Can/May I ask …*	0.91	
Assertiveness	Preface Tilt	Preface favors either yes or no	0 No tilt 1 Innocuous tilt 2 Unfavorable tilt	0.67	0.80
	Negative Interrogatives[b]	*Isn't it … ? Couldn't you … ?*	0 Not a negative Q 1 Negative Q	0.94	
Adversarialness	Preface Adversarialness	Q preface is oppositional	0 Nonadversarial preface 1 Oppositional preface focus of Q 2 Oppositional preface presupposed	0.79	0.78
	Global Adversarialness	Overall Q is oppositional	0 Not oppositional overall 1 Oppositional overall	0.66	
Accountability	*Why did you …* *How could you …*	Q seeks explanation for policy	0 Not an accountability Q 1 Why *did you …* 2 *How could you …*		0.76

[a] Our coding of indirectness included grammatically indirect questions (e.g., *Could I ask whether …*) in addition to indirect question frames (e.g., Could I ask you the same question …). In this paper we will from time to time use the expression *indirect question forms* to embrace both types of conventional indirectness.
[b] Consistent with our coding of directness (see fn. a), the coding of negative interrogatives includes cases where the question frame is so formulated (see excerpt 8).

As is evident in Table 1, the majority of indicators concern linguistic features of question design, with a minority (clustering in the "adversarialness" dimension) involving referential or topical content. This emphasis on formal features has various advantages. First, it enables a longitudinal focus on journalistic culture. Question content (e.g., questions about the current political situation, the president's private life, etc.) is intrinsically bound up with local sociopolitical realities which are necessarily transitory. Formal aspects of question design, by contrast, are inherently independent of question content and the circumstances that they describe, and are thus comparable across presidents. There are further advantages for both the reliability and validity of the coding system. While content categories tend to be interpretive and their application requires considerable judgment (Krippendorff, 1980: 62–63), formal design features are relatively concrete and hence more reliably codable. As reported elsewhere (Clayman et al., 2006), coding was performed by a team of 14 coders working in pairs with decisions requiring consensus. Reliability was assessed by recoding a subsample of ten conferences, using Cohen's kappa to evaluate the level of agreement. As also reported in Clayman et al., 2006, coding was highly reliable especially in the coding of overall dimensions (Table 1, far right column), with 3 measures at or above the .80 threshold and one just shy of that level at .78. Since Kappa scores of .75 or above suggest an adjusted agreement level of 90% or higher (Bakeman et al., 1997), the coding system is indeed highly reliable.

As for validity, the formal question-design features used in this study have been the focus of extensive prior research, both on journalistic questioning per se (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a) and on questioning practices in interaction generally. This research demonstrates that such design features are understood and treated by interactants as embodying aggressiveness in various forms, furnishing an "emic" basis for their validity (Clayman and Heritage, 2021).

For the present study, we set aside the content-based indicators and focus on two formal design features (conventional indirectness, negative interrogatives) that exert varieties of pressure on response.

2.4. Analytic approach

Our approach combines distributional analyses of aggregate trends in question formats over time, with context-sensitive analysis of individual cases within the sequential environments in which they were produced. The sequential analysis provided an "emic" foundation for the initial development of the coding system, and also adds specificity to the presentation of distributional findings. This general approach interweaves conversation analytic methods together with coding and quantification, a synthesis of methods that has a variety of synergistic payoffs (Clayman and Heritage, 2021).

2.4.1. The decline of conventionally indirect question forms

A primary aspect of question design in this context is the directness with which an issue is put before the president. A fundamental dimension of choice for a questioner is whether to frame a question directly as in "Will you speak to the British Ambassador this week?", or with an indirect frame as in "Can you tell me whether you will speak to the British Ambassador this week?"

Previous research, focusing on requests for *information* (Clark 1979) as well as *action* (Blum-Kulka 1987), suggests that, *ceteris paribus*, conventionally indirect question forms will be perceived as more polite (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983). As Leech (1983: 108) observed,

> Indirect illocutions tend to be more polite (a) because they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be.

In conversation analytic terms, the direct version of the question holds the recipient accountable for a response (Schegloff 2007), and creates the conditions under which other types of response will be seen as "resistant" or possibly "evasive." Conversely indirect versions open an "escape route" where a response like "I can't" (e.g., excerpt 1 below) may be understood as straightforwardly responsive even though it provides no substantive information. In general, Brown and Levinson (1987:132 et seq) argued that conventional indirectness strikes a balance between the need to convey requestive force without appearing coercive. Indirect question forms may be construed as "softer," "mitigated," or less face-threatening relative to their more direct alternatives (Brown and Levinson, 1987), though their connection to 'politeness' in the English context is comparatively recent (Culpeper and Archer, 2008; Culpeper and Demmen, 2011). In a related analysis focusing on requests for action rather than information (cf., Blum-Kulka 1987), Curl and Drew (2008) demonstrate that question forms can either present a stance of entitlement to a response, or alternatively can orient to contingencies that may inhibit a recipient's ability or willingness to grant the request for action. In the context of news conferences and the questioning of presidents, and notwithstanding various local contingencies that can influence question design,[2] on the whole indirect question forms may be said to index a parallel stance that communicates a recognition of contingencies that may inhibit response, and additionally therefore a reduced entitlement to response. In sum, indirect question forms may be said to enact a stance of relative deference toward the president.

In news conference questioning, indirectness recurrently emerges in two primary forms deploying either (1) other-referencing or (2) self-referencing question frames. For the case of other-referencing forms, the question frame invokes the recipient's ability (*Can you …, Could you …*) or willingness (*Will you …, Would you …*) to answer. Here are some examples.

[2] For instance, the journalist may believe the president is not in a position to know the answer, or may have other context-specific and defensible reasons for not answering (e.g., to avoid impacting sensitive negotiations, breaching trust, etc.).

(1) [Eisenhower 7 April 1954: 17] (from Clayman and Heritage, 2002b)
Jrn: -> Sir, could you tell us how soon you expect to name a successor to Mister Warren, the comptroller general?
Prs: No, I can't tell you.

(2) [Eisenhower 7 April 1954: 4] (from Clayman et al., 2006)
Jrn: -> Mister President, would you care to say anything to us about the loyalty and patriotism of Edward R. Murrow?
Prs: I am going to say nothing at all about that….

As is well known, these frames are syntactically "optional" in that the core query could have been formulated without the frame (cf., *How soon do you expect to …* is the direct alternative to the question in excerpt 1). We note this to underscore that their use, or non-use for that matter, is a locus of choice for each and every question that is asked.

In the case of self-referencing forms, the question frame normally invokes the speaker's ability or interest in asking the question. Notice that these forms include requests for permission to ask (*Could I ask …, May I ask …*, as in excerpt 3 below), statements indexing a desire for information (*I would like to ask …, I want to ask …*, as in excerpt 4), and forms expressing curiosity (*I wonder …*, as in excerpt 5).

(3) [Eisenhower 8 October 1953: 20] (from Clayman and Heritage, 2002b)
Jrn: -> …Could I ask you the same question in reference to him that was asked about Chief Justice Warren last week, that is, what are the qualifications that attracted Mister Mitchell to you, as Secretary of Labor?

(4) [Eisenhower 1 July 1953: 16] (from Clayman and Heritage, 2002b)
Jrn: -> I would like to ask whether you feel that the events which are now taking place create an opportunity for the administration to take any tangible action to support liberation in line with its stated objectives?

(5) [Reagan 16 June 1981: 14] (from Clayman and Heritage, 2002b)
Jrn: -> …I just wondered whether Congress and other special interest groups might get the message that if they yelled and screamed loud enough, you might modify your tax cut plan again?

As in the case of other-referencing frames, these self-referencing frames are also optional pragmatic choices.

These are, of course, grammatical and conventionalized ways of evoking conditions for responding. In their various ways, these formats express some reduction in the journalist's entitlement to ask a question or to receive an answer to it, and a corresponding reduction in the president's obligation to answer (Curl and Drew, 2008). This is vividly illustrated in cases like the first excerpt, where an other-referencing question frame is exploited in the response.

(1) [Eisenhower 7 April 1954: 17] (from Clayman and Heritage, 2002b)
Jrn: -> Sir, could you tell us how soon you expect to name a successor to Mister Warren, the comptroller general?
Prs: No, I can't tell you.

Table 2 reports the distribution of indirect question forms over 48 years in 8-year intervals.

Table 2
Distribution of indirect question forms 1953–2000.

	Self-Referencing		Other-Referencing		Self + Other[a]		Total Indirect		Total Qs
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Eisenhower 1953–1960	95	12.3	194	25.2	75	9.7	364	47.2	771
Kennedy–Johnson 1961–1968	36	5.3	154	22.5	36	5.3	226	33.0	684
Nixon–Ford 1969–1976	53	6.8	114	14.7	23	3.0	190	24.5	776
Carter–Reagan (I) 1977–1984	52	6.2	73	8.8	15	1.8	140	16.8	833
Reagan (II)–Bush 1985–1992	37	4.3	37	4.3	5	0.6	79	9.1	869
Clinton 1993–2000	57	8.4	42	6.2	16	2.4	115	17.0	675
Total	330	7.2	614	13.3	170	3.7	1114	24.2	4608

[a] This category of questions includes both self- and other referencing frames within a single question (e.g., I wonder if you could tell us ….).

In general, the majority of questions to the president (circa 76%) across our half-century database are directly formulated. Among the free-standing indirect forms, other-referencing frames were nearly twice as frequent as self-referencing forms. In addition, both frames were used in combination nearly 4% of the time.

Table 2 also shows that indirect question forms have steadily declined in frequency through almost the entire sampling period, with the exception of a modest increase during the Clinton presidency. This decline is evident across both self- and other-referencing forms, their deployment in combination, and each of their coded varieties (e.g., ability frames, willingness frames, requests for permission, etc.). While questions directed to President Eisenhower in the 1950s were indirect almost half of the time, this proportion fell to less than 10% for the period 1985–1992 spanning President Reagan's second term and President George H.W. Bush's term in office. The reduction of indirect questioning was remarkably consistent in the pre-Clinton era, declining by a factor of approximately one third for each time period relative to the prior. Presidents thus consistently faced more direct questions than their predecessors. This trend does not appear to have been influenced by exogenous political and economic factors (e.g., the business cycle, presidential second terms, etc.; see Clayman et al., 2007).

This aggregate consistency played out somewhat differently for different forms of indirectness. Other-referencing frames show a remarkably steady rate of decline across most of sampling period except for a slight increase in the final 8-year segment. Self-referencing frames, by contrast, show a significant initial decline from Eisenhower to Kennedy, followed by an extended period of stability when their frequency remained more or less constant, albeit with modest fluctuations toward the end and a similar slight rise in the final 8-year segment. In somewhat different ways, then, both forms of indirectness appear to be relatively insensitive to exogenous conditions.

Disaggregating the distribution of question frame-types within the self- and other-referencing categories, the following observations are striking. Consider, first, other-referencing frames (Table 3).

Table 3
Distribution of other-referencing frames 1953–2000.

	N	%
No other referencing	3824	83.0
Ability frames	598	13.0
Willingness Frames	186	4.0
Total	4608	100.0

References to the president's ability to answer (*Can you …, Could you …*) outnumbered references to willingness to answer (*Will you …, Would you …*) by more than a 3:1 ratio. Journalists were thus far more likely to license the possibility of a non-answering response on the grounds of external circumstances, and were relatively unlikely to license a non-answer on the grounds of mere preference or choice. Moreover, while both forms declined in frequency over time, willingness frames declined to a near vanishing point by the end of our sampling period. While Eisenhower was asked about his willingness to answer in 11.2% of all questions, this dropped to less than 1% in the post-Reagan era of Bush and Clinton (1988–2000). In effect, question frames licensing unwillingness to respond declined to virtual extinction.

Turning to the less-frequent self-referencing question frames (Table 4), *I wonder* is by far the most common of these, occurring almost 4 times more frequently than all other self-referencing forms combined. It represented 17.5% of the questions to Eisenhower, but falls to just 4% for Bush, before rebounding to the historical average in the Clinton era.

Table 4
Distribution of self-referencing frames 1953–2000.

	N	%
No self-referencing	4108	89.2
I wonder …	396	8.6
Desire statements	72	1.6
I want/would like to ask …		
Permission requests. *Can I/May I ask …*	32	0.7
Total	4608	100.0

Frames referencing the journalist's desire for information (*I would like …, I want …*) were far less frequent, and questions formed as requests for permission to ask (*Can I …, May I …*) were the least frequent of all within the self-referencing category. Here we also note that these latter permission request forms were strongly associated with follow-up questions – a situation in which the journalist seeks an opportunity to go beyond the one-question rule of news conferences, and the president's decision to permit a supplementary question and to respond to it is determinative. Half of all permission request forms were used in a follow-up context.

Taken as a whole, the dataset exhibits a major decline in conventional indirectness over a half-century of news conferences. Some of the specific linguistic forms of indirectness (most notably, willingness frames) have nearly vanished, suggesting a fundamental alteration in the journalistic repertoire. Drawing on Curl and Drew's (2008) analysis of entitlement and contingency in question design, we suggest that self-referencing question frames primarily express a reduced sense of entitlement to ask and to obtain an answer. Viewed through this lens, the decline of self-referencing frames indexes an increasing journalistic prerogative when dealing directly with the president.

Other-referencing question frames, on the other hand, primarily index contingencies (e.g., inability, unwillingness) bearing on the president's obligation to answer. By indexing these contingencies, journalists convey reduced constraints obligating response. Hence the decline of other-referencing frames indexes an upshift in the president's obligation to address the question at hand. On the whole, the decline of conventional indirectness in questions to the president suggests that both the journalistic entitlement to question and the president's obligation to respond have significantly risen over the 48-year time-period of our study.

2.4.2. Negative interrogatives and political assertiveness

We have, to this point, been dealing with question design features that mitigate the pressure on the president to address the question as asked. Now we turn to features that constrain the *content* of the response. While the mitigating practices of question design have declined over time, in some cases to a vanishing point, the constraining forms to be outlined here have increased substantially and in some cases represent absolute innovations that expand the journalist's questioning repertoire.

Consider questions that are formed as negative interrogatives (henceforth N–I), employing formats such as "Isn't it … ", "Doesn't this … ", and "Don't you … ", as for example this question to President Clinton regarding a fundraising scandal.

(6) [Clinton 7 March 1997] (from Clayman and Heritage, 2002b)

1	Jrn:		**W'l Mister President in your zea:l (.) for funds during**
2		->	**the last campaign .hh didn't you put the Vice President (.)**
3			**an' Maggie and all the others in your (0.4) administration**
4			**top side .hh in a very vulnerable position, hh**
5			**(0.5)**
6	Prs:	->	**I disagree with that.hh u- How are we vulnerable because …**

It is noticeable that, in response, Clinton treats this interrogative as a viewpoint to be disputed ("I disagree with that") rather than an information-seeking question to be answered.

According to Bolinger (1957), negative interrogatives are conducive for an affirmative response. When delivered from a position of knowledge, they are understood as "assertions" rather than "questions," whereas when delivered from a position of ignorance they assume the more familiar guise of information seeking (see also Heritage, 2002, Clayman and Heritage 2002b; Heritage and Roth, 1995; Heinemann, 2006; Koshik, 2002). Bolinger's argument is borne out by a variety of cases from ordinary conversation (Heritage, 2002).

In encounters between journalists and public figures, there is a default understanding that the journalist is there to seek information from interviewees on behalf of an overhearing audience (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a) and will do so by means of questions. As argued elsewhere (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a; Heritage, 2002), negative interrogatives straddle the boundary between asking for information and asserting an opinion. Their grammatical form is interrogative, but they are understood as asserting a point of view, as evidenced by responses such as that in excerpt 6. This is the only interrogative form that regularly attracts such responses. While presidents are very unlikely to endorse the perspective advanced through a negative interrogative, they are nonetheless held to account for the opinion asserted through the journalist's question by, for example, rejecting or refuting it. In short, politicians are thus answerable to the point of view expressed through the question, regardless of their personal preferences and indeed regardless of the destination at which their response eventually arrives.

2.4.3. The growth of negative interrogatives

Negative interrogatives emerged only gradually over the half-century examined in our study (see Table 5). They began as a very infrequently used practice, comprising just over 3% of the questions to Eisenhower (1953–1956), and these were disproportionately clustered in his second term in office. Falling to 1% of the questions asked of Kennedy and Johnson (1961–1968), this form only reached 4% during Nixon and Ford administrations, and most of these cases (fully three-quarters) are clustered in 1973–1976 following Nixon's re-election and the emergence of Watergate as a prominent scandal (Lang and Lang, 1991).

Table 5
Distribution of negative interrogatives 1953–2000.

	Negative Interrogatives		Total Yes/No Qs
	N	**%**	
Eisenhower 1953–1960	13	3.2	408
Kennedy–Johnson 1961–1968	4	1.1	357
Nixon–Ford 1969–1976	16	4.0	403
Carter–Reagan (I) 1977–1984	51	11.9	427
Reagan (II) – Bush 1985–1992	49	10.1	485
Clinton 1993–2000	31	8.1	381
Total	164	6.7	2461

During the late 1970s and 1980s, by contrast, the use of negative interrogatives ballooned, recording a three-fold rise during the Carter and first Reagan administrations (1977–1984). It tapered off slightly during the second Reagan and the Bush administration (1985–1992), and again during the Clinton administration (1993–2000). Reviewing this table, it can be noted

that the Nixon era represents something of watershed in the growth of these questions. In the period up to the end of Ford's term (1953–1976), N–I questions represented just under 2.8% of all polar questions. For the remaining years (1976–2000), that proportion nearly quadrupled to 10.1%.

2.4.4. Changing topics: what are negative interrogatives being used to address?

Coinciding with the growth in the deployment of negative interrogatives was a gradual shift in the topics addressed using this form, and their tone and tenor. In the first half of our sampling period (1953–1976), negative interrogative questions were rarely focused on major domestic policy issues or foreign policy decisions. Rather they emerged, for example, as vehicles for attempts to commit the president to positions on forthcoming electoral contests and, in a context in which the president was unlikely to be drawn into a serious response, they assumed a semi-serious, or even lighthearted, tone, as in the following questions about potential candidates for vice-president.

(7) [Eisenhower 1 August 1956]

1	Jrn:		**Mr. President, in the light of what you have said about**
2			**Mr. Nixon this morning and your failure to comment about**
3			**other candidates for the Vice Presidency,**
4		->	**is it not inevitable that we should conclude that**
5			**Mr. Nixon is your preference?**
6	Prs:		**Well you have a right to conclude what you please. But I**
7			**have said that I would not express a preference….**

(8) [Nixon 29 June 1972]

1	Jrn:	->	**Isn't it time you told us, will Agnew be on the ticket?**
2	Prs:		**I know that that is a question that is very much on the**
3			**minds of the delegates who will be coming to Miami in August…**

It may be noted further that both of these questions invite confirmation from the president that his current vice president will be his running mate in the forthcoming election, a virtually foregone conclusion from historical precedent.

Some of the negative interrogative questions addressed topics in an explicitly humorous fashion, as in excerpt 9 where President Eisenhower is asked if he is contemplating the repeal of the 22nd Amendment to the US Constitution, which prohibits Presidents from holding office for more than two terms[3]:

(9) [Eisenhower 30 January 1957]

1	Jrn:		**Mr. President, I wonder if you would clarify statement that you made**
2			**earlier. I think you said in the present tense, '….if I ever run again."**
3			**What were you referring to there, sir?**
4	Prs:		**No; I was talking about the past. I said I stated during my first**
5			**Administration that "if I should ever run again," I wanted to run**
6			**on policies and not personalities.**
7	Jrn:	->	**I wondered, sir, if you might not be referring to the possibility**
8			**of the repeal of the twenty-second amendment.**
9	Prs:		**Look, I will give you people a piece of news. They can repeal it**
10			**if they want to. I shall not run again. [Laughter]**

To be sure, there were occasional instances where the N–I format was used to address non-obvious and serious matters. In the following case, an N–I question raised a populist topic related to the U.S. "butter mountain" – a product of price supports that inflated prices. Here the questioner proposes reductions in price supports using an N–I question format.

(10) [Eisenhower 2 April 1953] (from Clayman et al., 2020)

1	Jrn:		**Mr President, if I could get away from high politics to butter, do you**
2			**think there is anything you can do in the long term, so that people**
3			**can get butter at reasonable prices, and not have it stored away at**
4			**taxpayers expense to spoil? It is a long-term problem, I know, but**
5			**it's a symbolic thing.**
6	Prs:		**Well of course, you are talking about something where you could far**
7			**better go to the Secretary of Agriculture and get a really definitive**
8			**answer to such a question. …..**
9	Jrn:		**But Sir the reason we have so many million - nearly half a billion-**
10			**pounds in storage is because the taxpayers' money is taken to buy,**
11			**put it there.**
12	Prs:		**I think you are exaggerating the figures somewhat, but it's still**
13			**too large in my opinion…….**
14	Jrn:		**Well sir if you did not - this administration did not price support**
15		->	**it, couldn't you find an outlet in the ordinary people buying it–**
16			**the housewives - at prices they could pay?**
17	Prs:		**I would say ….**

[3] This negatively framed question lacks subject-verb inversion because it is embedded in an if-clause and an 'I wonder' frame which appear designed to achieve an exaggerated deferential effect integral to the humor of the question.

For another instance in the national security arena, consider this question concerning the nuclear arms race, where the affirmative tilt of the format carries the implication that the president would or perhaps should be worried about Russian atomic weapons.

(11) [Eisenhower 7 April 1954] (from Clayman et al., 2020)

1	**Jrn:**	**->**	**Mr. President, aren't you afraid that Russia will make bigger**
2			**hydrogen bombs before we do?**
3	**Prs:**		**No I am not afraid of it…..**

Granting these occasional exceptions, a large majority of N–I questions launched in the first quarter century of our study sample were directed to relatively insignificant and even humorous topics, and their assertive import was correspondingly attenuated.

After 1972, N–I questions were directed to more significant aspects of presidential responsibilities and statecraft and their assertiveness assumed a more critical edge, spilling over into direct criticism of presidential decisions and conduct.

(12) [Bush 11 March 1992]

1	**Jrn:**		**Mr. President, you seem to be brushing off this 30-to-40-percent**
2			**consistent voting for Pat Buchanan as a frustration with the economy.**
3		**->**	**Sir, doesn't the buck stop here? Don't you take any responsibility -**
4			**and your predecessor, Ronald Reagan - for the state of the economy, sir?**
5	**Prs:**		**Absolutely.**
6	**Jrn:**		**Well, so why should people vote for you if it's your fault?**
7	**Prs:**		**Because they know I'm trying to change it…..**

In this exchange during the George H.W. Bush presidency, Bush and his predecessor are held directly responsible for 'frustration with the economy,' through two successive negative interrogatives which achieve near-accusatory force.

And a year later President Clinton, questioned about a decision to allow the FBI to attack a compound in Waco, Texas that ended in the deaths of 76 people was effectively accused of authorizing the attack through an N–I question.

(13) [Clinton 20 April 1993]

1	**Jrn:**		**Mr. President, why are you still saying it was a Janet Reno**
2		**->**	**decision? Isn't it, in the end, your decision?**
3	**Prs:**		**Well, what I'm saying is that I didn't have a 4- or 5-hour briefing**
4			**from the FBI. I didn't go over every strategic part of it. It is a**
5			**decision for which I take responsibility. I'm the President of the**
6			**United States, and I signed off on the general decision giving her**
7			**authority to make the last call….**

Here, the question directly contradicts Clinton's stated public position that presented Janet Reno, his Attorney General, as responsible for the debacle.

As we have argued, post-1976 news conferences witnessed not only a proliferation of N–I questions, but also a progressive darkening of their content and tenor from lighthearted uses in addressing relatively innocuous topics that was characteristic of the Eisenhower administration to serious and significant policy issues in which the president was directly held accountable for policy decisions.

Table 6 demonstrates that the content pattern evident in the preceding cases is quite widespread. In a context of increasing use of the N–I format, there is also a growth in content that takes an explicitly adversarial stance toward the president. In the

Table 6
Distribution of N–I questions with adversarial content.

	Not adversarial		Adversarial		Total
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**	
Eisenhower 1953–60	12	92	1	8	13
Kennedy – Johnson 1961–68	3	75	1	25	4
Nixon–Ford 1969–76	12	75	4	25	16
Carter – Reagan (I) 1977–84	33	65	18	35	51
Reagan (II) – Bush 1985–92	34	69	15	31	49
Clinton 1993–2000	24	77	7	23	31
Total	118	72	46	28	164

1950s, N–I questions were almost never adversarial in content. Later eras witness substantial and growing numbers of adversarial N–I questions, which also grew as a proportion of N–I questions generally, a trend that peaked in the Carter-Reagan I era (1977–84).

These increasingly adversarial uses of the N–I format were considerably enhanced by their elaboration through the employment of statement prefaces to which we now turn.

2.4.5. Increasing assertiveness: prefacing N–I questions

A general characteristic of modern broadcast news interviews and presidential news conferences is the use of question prefaces that provide context or background for the subsequent question (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a). This use has been a feature of US interview journalism since the 1950s, and emerged in UK broadcast interviews a little later (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a: 26–56). Approximately 57% of the questions in our news conference study were prefaced with one or more statements.

Many of these prefatory statements provide a straightforward context or pretext for the question that follows, as in (14).

(14) [Kennedy 11 April 1962] (from Clayman et al., 2020)

1	Jrn:	->	**Mr. President, now that General Clay is coming home from Berlin,**
2		->	**don't you think that the service wives have borne the brunt of our gold**
3			**shortage long enough, and should be permitted to join their soldier**
4			**husbands in Europe.**

Prefaces of this kind are not in themselves assertive or persuasive, neither are they convergent with any argumentative or assertive features of the subsequent question, even in cases when (as in 12) the question may be heard to imply a criticism of the administration.

However, the 'factual context' communicated by a question preface may combine with the yes-favoring 'tilt' of N–I questions to enhance the overall assertiveness of the question, as in (15).

(15) [Clinton 10 Aug 1995]

1	Jrn:	->	**Mr President, with your decision on tobacco you're taking on one**
2			**of the biggest cash crops in a region where you've already got**
3			**major political problems.**
4			**Are you writing off the south for next year's elections?**
5		->	**And isn't this a blow to other Democratic candidates in tobacco**
6			**states?**

Here the preface identifies a policy decision adverse to the tobacco industry and for that reason politically problematic in the deeply contested southern states. This "background" combines with the N–I to underscore the suggestion that Clinton policies have politically damaging consequences for his fellow Democrats.

In a similar vein, this prefatory comment on President Ford's travel logs (1–6) bolsters the criticism leveled by Ford's opponent and introduced through the subsequent N–I (7–9) that Ford has been "hiding in the White House". This in turn insinuates that Ford's campaign has been lacking in energy and confidence.

(16) [Ford 14 Oct 1977]

1	Jrn:	->	**Mr. President, a review of your travel logs from this fall**
2			**and last fall shows that for a comparable period last fall**
3			**you spent exactly as much time on the road – 15 days last**
4			**fall - when there was no campaign and no election than you**
5			**have this fall when there is a hotly contested presidential**
6			**election.**
7		->	**Doesn't this lend a little bit of credence to Governor Carter's**
8			**charge that you've been kind of hiding in the White House for**
9			**most of this campaign?**

The preceding examples illustrate the use of prefaced N-Is to introduce matters that create political difficulties for the president. They are both assertive and undesirable, but they are focused on past actions and their political consequences, and do not have direct implications for actions moving forward. In the next example, by contrast, an N–I is elaborated with a prefatory depiction of a serious and long-standing social problem (starving children) that plainly merits remedial action.

(17) [Eisenhower 27 April 1960] (from Clayman et al., 2020)

1	Jrn:	->	**For more years than you have been in the White House, the**
2			**pitiful children of the West Virginia unemployed coal miners**
3			**have been starving for proper food. We do give them whatever**
4			**surpluses we have. While you and Congress talk about helping**
5		->	**the needy in foreign countries, isn't there something that you**
6			**could do for needy Americans in this rich America of our own?**
7	Prs:		**Well, Mrs. Craig, you say they haven't been helped. I thought they had…..**

Here the reference to “pitiful children”, “unemployed coal-miners” and the phrase “starving for proper food”, is contrasted with US support for “the needy in foreign countries”. This contrast adds force to the N–I question urging charitable action at home.

In the next example, the prefatory argument is considerably more elaborate, and identifies a series of economic indicators (declining housing starts and building permits, expert predictions of a flagging economic recovery, popular concerns about high interest rates, and large projected federal deficits with implied borrowing costs) all of which reinforce the N–I call for action to reduce interest rates.

(18) [Reagan 19 Oct 1983: 28] (from Clayman and Heritage, 2002b)

JRN: -> Mr. President, new figures out today show that
housing starts were down pretty sharply last month,
and the number of building permits went down for
the second month in a row. Analysts are saying
this could mean the economic recovery is going to
level off, maybe kind of peter out next year.
And more people are becoming concerned about
high interest rates. And given the big deficits
being projected by your own administration,
-> isn't it time for some strong action by you to
get interest rates down?

Correspondingly, in (19) the journalist's depiction of a “devastating French military disaster in Vietnam leads to an N-I that asserts comparability with the current positioning of U.S. troops in Lebanon.

(19) [Reagan 19 Oct 1983: 20] (from Clayman and Heritage, 2002b)

JRN: -> Mr. President, before the United States went into Vietnam,
the French suffered a devastating defeat there by putting
their troops in a saucer-shaped depression with the enemy
up around the sides shooting down at them.
Q -> Doesn't this appear uncomfortably similar to you
to the way we are deploying our troops in Lebanon
on the low ground?
Q -> And how soon can we expect that we're going to
redeploy them to a spot that makes more sense?

The journalist's stance toward the N–I as representing established fact is underscored by the second question which presupposes it as immediately actionable through the president's redeployment of troops.

The use of question prefaces in conjunction with N–I questions has increased substantially over time. Table 7 shows the magnitude of this increase. In the first half of our sampling period (1953–76), 45% of N–I questions were prefaced; the second half of our sampling period (1977–2000) witnessed a nearly 50% increase to 67%.

Table 7
Distribution of prefaced N–I questions.

	Total N–I	Prefaced N–I	
		n	%
Eisenhower 1953–60	13	6	46
Kennedy – Johnson 1961–68	4	2	50
Nixon–Ford 1969–76	16	7	44
Carter – Reagan (I) 1977–84	51	38	74.5
Reagan (II) – Bush 1985–92	49	31	63
Clinton 1993–2000	31	19	61
Total	164	103	63

This increase in elaborated assertiveness parallels the increase in the adversarial content of N-I questions (see Table 6), which grew by 68% (from 18.2% adversarial in the first half of our sampling period to 30.5% in the second half). So beyond the sheer increase in the frequency of negative interrogatives, such questions have grown more elaborately assertive and more substantively adversarial over time.

3. Discussion

We have documented two trends in the questioning of U.S. presidents across the second half of the 20th century. The two trends are in some respects the inverse of one another: the precipitous decline of conventionally indirect question forms, and the dramatic ascent of negative interrogatives both without and with prefaces which those questions presupposed. Notwithstanding the inverse direction of these trends, both suggest a common impetus: a determination to exert increasing pressure on presidents in the news conference context.

These increasing forms of pressure were focused on different aspects of presidential response. First, the reduction of indirect forms entails increasing insistence that the president take up the question at all. Thus, as we have seen, the decline of other-referencing ability and willingness frames reduces the capacity of the president to sidestep the question and increases the visibility and accountability of efforts at evasion when they occur. The corresponding fall in self-referencing frames embodies the expression of increasing journalistic entitlement in the asking of questions, and by implication entitlement to an answer. In Curl and Drew's (2008) terms, these reciprocal declines increase the journalistic entitlement to ask while simultaneously reducing the recognition of contingencies that would license and enable non-response from the president. The net effect is to tighten the bonds of obligation on the president.

If our first trend increases the obligation for presidential response per se, the second pushes toward affirmation of the proposition forwarded by the question and, increasingly, this push is bolstered by a prefatory statement. Recall that the negative interrogative form is the most assertive grammatical form for polar questions in English, the only such form frequently treated as having expressed an opinion (e.g., *I disagree with that*) (Heritage, 2002). The rise of this question form indexes an increasing tendency to treat the question's embedded proposition as correct, preferable, expectable, etc., while also suggesting that the president "should" affirm it. In contrast to the decline of indirect question forms, the rise of negative interrogatives represents an increasing impetus to lean on the president to answer in a particular way, or else to offer a defense of the alternative position.

Both of these trends in the linguistic exertion of pressure, it should be noted, arise and develop in tandem with the general growth in adversarial content across the entire 48-year period (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b; Clayman et al., 2006).

Our two trends, however, exhibit a striking contrast in their relationship to exogenous social and political factors which are generally associated with fluctuations in a variety of questioning practices across the period (Clayman et al., 2007; Clayman et al., 2010). Negative interrogatives, as an aspect of assertive questioning, *are* systematically associated with a variety of contextual changes – both positive and negative – in the socioeconomic and political fabric of American society. In particular, assertiveness in questioning was positively associated with domestic affairs content (by contrast with national security and foreign affairs), with second presidential terms more than first terms, and with rising interest and unemployment rates. In this context, it is no accident that prefaced negative interrogatives reached a peak in the period 1977–84, a period of "stagflation" in which high interest rates were combined with high unemployment rates, and in a post-Watergate context where distrust of the presidency had risen sharply.

In stark contrast to the contextual sensitivity of negative interrogative assertiveness, conventional indirectness is remarkably *insensitive* to the shifting sociopolitical context. As we have seen, for the bulk of our sample period the aggregate frequency of indirect question forms exhibited a steady and inexorable decline across numerous presidential administrations and shifting economic conditions. This aggregate consistency played out somewhat differently for different forms of indirectness, with self-referencing frames dropping more early on, other-referencing frames dropping more steadily and extendedly, and both forms rising slightly in the final 8-year period. Remarkably then, both indirect question forms are evidently insensitive to the panoply of socioeconomic and political factors that matter for so many other features of question design.

We do not have solid evidence with which to account for this remarkable result. Taken at face value, the decline in indirect questioning expresses reduced deference to the institution of the presidency and the person of the president. One possibility is that this trend reflects the institutionalization of the presidential news conference itself as a public event and a corresponding emergence of journalistic entitlement especially during the first half of our sampling period. However, this trend is also roughly congruent, at least in its general direction, with opinion polls documenting Americans' waning trust in politicians (McCarthy, 2021), and the growth of intensified government transparency and oversight mechanisms (e.g., sunshine laws, inspectors general, etc.; see Schudson 2016). Moreover, we do not have compelling evidence that the growth of direct questioning is specifically tied to the presidency; it could be one manifestation of a more general decline in respect for authority, or perhaps a generational decline in the formalities attending direct interaction as the "baby boomers" gained sociocultural ascendency over the earlier "silent" (1928–45) and "greatest" (1901–1927) generations in American society. Whatever the cause, this is a remarkable and as yet enigmatic development.

At the beginning of this paper, it was noted that the timeframe of our study period begins at a turning point in the nature of the presidential news conference. While prior conferences were off the record by default and were consequently "backstage" encounters between journalists and presidents, our data involve encounters that are thoroughly public, with journalists recognized as asking questions on behalf of an "overhearing" audience (Heritage, 1985), and presidents as speaking publicly and for the record. In this way, presidential news conferences have become more thoroughly implicated in mechanisms of governmental accountability (Schedler, 1999), and it has elsewhere been documented that such accountability mechanisms have expanded in the U.S. post-war context (Schudson, 2016). Language practices are an unavoidable component of this process. They embody orientations to accountability *in action*, including obligations on presidents to share information in the

service of transparency, and to be held answerable for their policies and practices. Correspondingly changes in language practices are simultaneously indices and enactments of an evolving normative landscape in which processes of accountability are fought out and undergo alteration. Historical change in the pragmatics of question-asking reverberates upon the social relations that it necessarily inhabits. It is this reflexive relationship that serves as a mandate for the study of the pragmatics of questioning, perhaps particularly when the recipient of questioning is the political leader of a democratic society.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Data availability

Data are publicly available through presidential libraries and university archives.

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