How You Like Me Now?[1]
Assessing the volatility of Trump's foreign policy beliefs.

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NOTE

Donald Trump entered the White House with a set of pro-mises to radically change US foreign policy (Fischer 2016), headed under his slogan to put 'America First'. Even though many satirists followed up on Trump's 'America First' by asking if their country could be second,[2] the state-ments Donald Trump makes on foreign policy leave foreign policy-makers struggling to understand his position. Apart from promising radical changes, Trump himself also seems to radically change his views with regard to earlier decisi-ons. Think for example of his adjusted version of the travel ban, in which Iran was suddenly excluded from the list or his contradictory claims with regard to the Israeli/Palesti-nian conflict.

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Trump seems to be unlike any previous US president as he dares to challenge the conventional (or foreign policy elite) thinking of foreign policy assumptions and challenges the value of policy expertise (Byman 2017). This rather new behaviour makes him 'unpredictable' in the eyes of many foreign policy-makers as they are left groping in the dark while trying to make sense of Trump's views on foreign policy. Furthermore, Trump seems to increase rather than decrease the gap between knowledge and foreign policy making in his own government by making uninformed claims with regard to pivotal foreign policy issues (e.g. his clear lack of knowledge and unwillingness to learn about nuclear policy). This was ever clearer last week, when he seemed to defy the basics of international diplomacy when he took a tougher stance on the G7 than on Saudi Arabia. The result? Merkel calling for a different type of EU-US relations on Sunday.

Are these fears about Trump's capriciousness warranted? To shed some light on this question, I analysed some speeches of Trump prior to and after the US elections in order to uncover his belief system by means of the operational code analysis (Walker et al, 1998).[3] The results of the analysis contribute to the knowledge of foreign policy makers and political analysts with regard to how Trump views the nature of political life and his strategic approach to political goals. I argue that changes in Trump's belief system align with the idea of political analysts that Trump's political beliefs are subject to change depending on the context in which he operates.

In order to analyse Trump's belief system prior to and after the US election, I made use of the operational code coding scheme developed by Walker et al. (1998) and ran the analysis with the Verbs in Context System (VICS) coding scheme.[4] Prior to the election, I ran 56 speeches through the coding software leading to the results below. After the election, the four main speeches Trump gave were used for analysis. The low results prior to the election (see figure 1) indicate that Trump held more conflictual philosophical and instrumental beliefs than in the period after the election, where Trump's beliefs indicate a more cooperative stance.
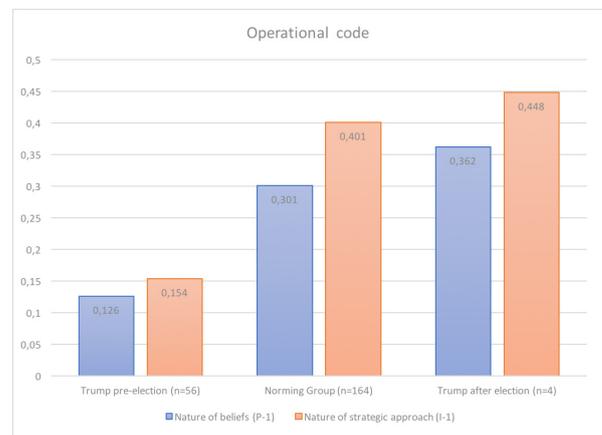

Figure 1: results operational code analysis

Many foreign policy analysts viewed Trump as a conflict-seeking leader during the campaign period, but their views seemed to change after his first speech in congress. Trump seemed to surprise them with a consensus-seeking approach (Tanz, 2017). These analysts seem to hypothesize that the change of roles (from campaigner to president) would have an effect on Trump's beliefs. Previous research indicates that beliefs of leaders can indeed be subject to change (Malici & Malici, 2005; Feng 2005), depending on factors such as role change, critical junctures or personality traits.

The changes in Trump's belief system prior to and after the US election seem to confirm the conflict-consensus hypothesis put forward by policy analysts. Furthermore, it leads to the question that if they changed here, they might change again and change the perspectives of foreign leaders in their depiction of the US as a trusted ally. If Trump's beliefs are indeed interchangeable, as this first data suggests, foreign policy makers would benefit from mere adaptive foreign policy strategies that are flexible and can deal with uncertainty.

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Footnotes

1   Song title from The Heavy, 2009 3

2   see for some examples: https://www.youtube.
com/
      watch?v=ELD2AwFN9Nc ; https://www.
      youtube.com/watch?v=mPGk0GQQR8Y ;
      https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWqs-
      D_6UNeI

3   The operational code or "OpCode" analysis
      (George, 1969 in Gross Stein, 1994) is a
      scientific approach in order to understand core
      beliefs of (political) leaders about the politi-
      cal world. "This includes both philosophical
      beliefs and instrumental beliefs about the
      optimal way to achieve one's goals" (George,
      1969 in Gross Stein, 1994). The "OpCode" is
      as such one example of a (actor-specific) model
      where the results can contribute to decreasing
      the knowledge gap between scholars and
      foreign policy makers. The "OpCode" analy-
      sis presents ten dimensions of political beliefs
      (see attachment). In this essay, I used results
      of Donald Trump's beliefs with regard to two
      of these: 1) the nature of the political universe
      (P-1) and 2) his strategic approach to politi-
      cal goals (I-1). These beliefs differ on a scale
      ranging from conflictual (-1.0) to cooperative
      (+1.00).

4   Software used to run the analysis: profiler
      plus, available at https://profilerplus.org/
      and www.socialscienceautomation.net

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Appendix 1

Ten philosophical and instrumental beliefs (Gross
Stein, 1994; Schafer et al, 1998)

P1. Nature of political universe. Either conflictual or
cooperative, values between -1.0 and 1.0
P2. Realization of political values, 6 categories from -3
to +3 (hostile to friendly)
P3. Political future, predictability ratio: .00 lowest to
1.00 highest predictability
P4. Control over historical development and outcomes
(self-attributions): .00 others to +1.00 self locus of
control

P5. Role of chance: if both predictability of others and
leaders' control over outcomes are low then role of
chance is high: .00 lowest to 1.00
I-1. Leaders strategic approach to political goals: net
attribution of positive and negative valences to the self:
-1.0 conflictual and +1.0 cooperative strategy
I-2. How goals and objectives can be pursued effec-
tively (intensity of strategy): scale from -3 to +3: -1.0
conflictual tactics and +1.0 cooperative tactics

I-5. Utility of means, conceptualize the exercise of political power as the choice of a control relationship between self and other in which self seeks or maintains control over relationships with others by using different types of words: percentage of transitive verb categories: .00 low utility or 1.00 high utility for each category of means.

I-3. Risk orientation: .00 risk averse +1.00 risk acceptant

I-4a. Timing of cooperation vs conflict

I-4b. Timing of words vs deeds

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Marij Swinkels is a PhD candidate and lecturer at the Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University. Her PhD focuses on the use of economic ideas of European political leaders during the Eurozone crisis and how stability or change of these economic ideas can be explained. She is involved in courses on political leadership, policy analysis and introduction to public administration. Furthermore, she founded a project to increase access to higher education for refugee students; inclUUsion.