

*After the Midterm Ordeal:  
Election Results and Presidential Belief Systems*

Steven E. Schier and B. Gregory Marfleet

The study of midterm elections can reveal an important influence on the beliefs of presidents. Employing constructs from the “operational code” literature regarding presidential foreign policy-making, we examine the impact of midterm election results upon presidential beliefs during two “normal” midterm elections: 1990 and 1994. We hypothesize that midterm elections encourage presidents to find the nature of the political universe more conflictual, to develop a lower locus of personal control over their environment, and to adopt more adversarial positions about their approach to personal goals. These effects should vary with the scale of the midterm setback. We find support for these hypotheses, usually with greater effects in the 1994 than 1990 case. Given the larger effects of the 1994 election upon the president, its status as a “normal” midterm election lies in question. Further research into other midterm cases is necessary to formulate a typology of midterm effects upon presidential beliefs.

Describing midterm elections as an ordeal for presidents is no overstatement. Only a handful of times has the president’s party gained Congressional seats in midterm elections and in all other cases, the result produced fewer partisans of the president’s party. The common lot for presidents is one of adjusting to midterm electoral reversals. Some of those have been numerically small (as in 1970 and 1990) and some quite large (as in 1946 and 1994). Midterms, however, are no longer uniformly bad news for presidents. In 1998 and 2002, the presidential parties gained seats in two consecutive midterms for the first time since the rise of the modern two-party system in the mid-19th century. Midterm results are now far more variable in their impact on presidents and thus potentially more consequential on presidential behavior.

Midterm elections are a highly significant event during a president’s term, determining the power holders in Congress and thus affecting any president’s pursuit of his goals. Midterm elections have spurred important shifts in the pattern of American voting and, as we will demonstrate here, the beliefs of presidents in office. Yet the former effect—the course of electoral behavior—has received much more attention from political scientists than has the latter. An explanation for this lies in the long-standing availability of midterm vote totals and voter surveys conducted by the University of

---

STEVEN SCHIER is Congdon Professor of Political Science at Carleton College. B. GREGORY MARFLEET is assistant professor of political science at Carleton College.

*The American Review of Politics*, Vol. 27, Spring, 2006: 1-20  
©2006 The American Review of Politics

Michigan's National Election Study and the corresponding absence of systematic means of assessing presidential reactions to midterm results.

Recent years have yielded new means for gauging how presidents assess midterm elections. We borrow a concept from another part of our discipline to address this question. World politics scholars have refined and improved the theoretical construct of a political leader's operational code, first introduced by Leites (1951, 1953) and further conceptualized by George (1969). Walker and Schafer define operational code as a "political belief system with some elements (philosophical beliefs) guiding the diagnosis of the context for action and others (instrumental beliefs) prescribing the most effective strategy and tactics for achieving goals" (2003, 1). Our paper examines the impact of midterm election results upon the operational code of two presidents—George H.W. Bush in 1990 and Bill Clinton in 1994. We examine the force of election results upon certain philosophical and instrumental beliefs of the two presidents.

Why Bush I and Clinton? The two cases provide ample data for examining the operational code of the two presidents both pre and post election. Coding and cleaning all available presidential statements issued over two 18-month periods is a laborious process, so we decided to begin with two similar midterms and then eventually broaden our analysis to more cases. By examining two cases so temporally proximate to each other, we effectively control for a number of influences on election outcomes and presidential statements—the campaign finance system, contemporary electoral alignments, media coverage patterns (pre-Internet), and domestic and international conditions (post Cold War peacetime). Alternative explanations for changing presidential belief patterns, such as scandals, great crises or policy upheavals, are not in evidence in our 1990 and 1994 cases.<sup>1</sup> We survey presidential statements in the twelve months before the midterm result and during the six months after the election to ascertain if the midterm results changed the philosophical and instrumental beliefs of the two presidents. Our qualitative analysis of the statements identified these periods as definable phases in presidential attention to the midterm election. We examined other possible temporal demarcations and found no great variation in patterns from those revealed by our six-month categories. We thus are confident that the patterns we present here are not an artifact of our temporal classifications. Our analysis includes all major public pronouncements of presidents—press conferences, extemporaneous comments, speeches—presenting a comprehensive portrait of a president's public persona (Walker and Schafer 2003), as valid a representation of presidential statements as is possible. In later sections of the paper, we discuss the relationship of changes in the president's operational code to subsequent executive-legislative policymaking.

Midterm elections can deliver three types of impacts upon presidents: a negative surprise (as in 1994), a positive surprise (as in 1998 and 2002) or a more “normal” outcome. The midterm losses for Clinton—52 House seats and eight Senate seats and loss of his party’s control of both chambers—were much greater than for Bush—eight House seats and one Senate seat, though Bush’s party remained in the minority in both chambers. Andrew Busch defines these two midterms as lying in the common category of “normal” midterms. Normal, that is, in that the president’s party lost seats and the results neither stifled a president having strong political momentum going into the midterm election nor preceded a major electoral reversal in the next presidential race (Busch 1999, 153-55). Busch’s method of classification makes the usual midterm result a residual category and may well mask important variations in the personal presidential reactions and the direction of national government to such “normal” results. We consider other classification possibilities in the following literature review.

### **Related Literature and the 1990 and 1994 Cases**

Despite their arguably considerable impact on the course of national elections and governance, midterm elections have received far less scholarly attention than have presidential contests. The largest body of midterm scholarship concerns mass electoral behavior. Andrew Busch terms this the “why and how much” debate (1999, 2) concerned with explaining why voters deal the president’s Congressional party a setback almost all of the time (Campbell 1991, 1997; Petrocik and Steeper 1986). This approach seeks to explain election results as dependent variables. Far less scholarly attention, as Busch notes, has focused on the “what difference does it make” question (1999, 5) that considers midterm elections as independent variables affecting the behavior of governmental actors. Busch broaches this subject in his 1999 book on midterm elections. In its conclusion, he lists several systemic consequences of midterm elections:

- changed strategic situation facing the president and both parties of Congress
- changed pattern of development of national issues
- declines in legislative productivity, increases in vetoes, falling presidential support scores
- new opportunities for the opposition party to develop leaders
- increased possibilities of intraparty splits in either Congressional party (Busch 1999, 182-83).

These effects reflect yet another impact of midterm elections—changes in the political beliefs of presidents. Our approach treats the midterm

election as an independent variable affecting a president's philosophical and instrumental conceptions of the political world. Given the president's great institutional powers (Pious 1979) and singular position of leadership in the American political system (Neustadt 1990), midterm election results can "make a big difference" in presidential beliefs and thus upon national governmental performance in the elections' wake. Our analysis examines differences in presidential statements about self and environment during three periods—the two six-month periods prior to the midterm election and the six-month period following the election.

An initial inspection of the 1990 and 1994 situations reveals important contextual features of each case. The six months prior to the 1990 midterm elections were not easy ones for George H.W. Bush. Economic growth began to cool. On June 26, the president reversed a 1988 campaign promise not to raise taxes by announcing support for a bipartisan bill to cut federal spending and raise taxes. This produced cries of opposition among conservative Republicans, most notably House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich (R-GA). The bill eventually passed Congress despite considerable GOP opposition. On August 2, Iraq invaded Kuwait, producing lengthy international negotiations over economic sanctions and possible war with Iraq. Buffeted by domestic political and economic challenges and budding international turmoil, the administration's party also suffered losses in the midterm elections. Though in 1990 George H.W. Bush suffered the smallest Congressional seat losses in twenty-eight years, his Congressional party receded to an even smaller minority status. Republicans fell to just 165 House seats and 44 Senate seats, the lowest totals for them in twelve years. Further, Bush faced a Congress that Democrats had dominated over the last half century. Democrats had held the House since 1954 and the Senate for all but six years since 1948.

Bush's 1990 reversal paled next to the 1994 difficulties endured by Bill Clinton. Clinton's job approval rested below 50 percent much of the year, lower than that of Bush four years earlier (Cook 1999, 1; Schneider 1990). In January, Attorney General Janet Reno appointed an independent counsel to investigate the Whitewater real estate dealings of the Clintons in Arkansas. In May, Paula Jones filed a sexual harassment lawsuit against the president. In July, Congressional hearings into the Whitewater scandal began. The administration's ambitious health care reform plan received Congressional rejection in September. Meanwhile, GOP Congressional leaders, led by House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich, sought to "nationalize" the midterm elections around a ten-item agenda they labeled their "Contract with America." The GOP strategy proved a big winner. Democrats lost control of the House for the first time since the 1954 election and suffered their largest losses—53 seats—since 1946. The Democrats' loss of seven Senate seats

was their biggest since the Reagan landslide of 1980 and came after Democrats held the Senate majority for forty of the previous forty-six years. By the numbers alone, this was a huge reversal.

One can make a case that the scale of the 1994 loss was far from “normal” and marked a different sort of midterm result than that of 1990. Bush’s 1990 loss was the smallest since the unusual midterm elections of 1962. However, the 1990 losses befell a minority party in Congress, whereas JFK’s tiny losses in 1962 allowed the Democrats to maintain majority status. The news for Bush in 1990 was more in keeping with the normal midterm news the presidents receive, but Clinton’s 1994 result may not have been “normal” at all. It is true that the 1994 results did not produce a Republican victory in the presidential election two years later, but at the time, the results seemed historic, given the scale of GOP gains. The *New York Times* termed the 1990 results “not much,” but declared the 1994 results “a powerful body blow to Bill Clinton and a repudiation of his party’s conduct in Congress” (“Day of Decision” 1990, A30; “Republican Gains” 1994, A26.). Given these divergent interpretations, the presidential reaction to the results may be more drastic in the Clinton case. In investigating the possible effects of midterm elections on presidential belief systems, we need next explore the concepts of operational code that serve as our dependent variable.

### **Presidential Beliefs and Operational Code**

To assess the degree to which midterm election setbacks affect a president’s beliefs about the political world, we employ the operational code construct. Operational code analysis has been described as a ‘person-in-situation-oriented’ model of inquiry that attempts to determine how a subject’s perception of the political decision environment “orients and propels” the actor via his or her preferences and choices (Walker and Schafer, 2003).

The op-code approach is a member of the cognitivist family of research programs situated predominantly within the foreign policy decision-making research tradition in international relations. The decision making approach to foreign policy analysis and the ‘man-milieu’ concept trace their origins to seminal works by Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin (1954) and Sprout and Sprout (1956). These early works spawned a number of research programs designed to assess the cognitive and personality characteristics of leaders ‘at-a-distance.’ The most successful and prominent of these programs have employed content analysis techniques to analyze public rhetoric systematically.<sup>2</sup>

Foreign policy researchers have gravitated toward leadership characteristics as explanatory variables. This is due to the greater latitude for action that presidents enjoy in the realm of foreign affairs and crisis management,

compared to the institutional restrictions they face in areas of domestic policy. They have also made the greatest advances in the systematic analysis of these factors. However, reference to leadership styles and personalities also has a long history in more general presidential studies research. James David Barber's *Presidential Character* (1972), now in its 4th edition (1992), has long been part of the presidential studies canon while more recent multi-leader analyses by Greenstein (1989), Renshon (1996), and George and George (1998) have supplemented innumerable case studies and psychobiographies of the presidents. We argue that the more extensively developed and systemic leadership analysis techniques available today should not be restricted solely to the realm of foreign policy.

Although Nathan Leites (1951) received credit for originating the operational code concept in his study of the Soviet Politburo, his initial framing referred to something akin to an organizational culture or system of shared beliefs. Alexander George (1969) is the progenitor of the contemporary cognitivist conceptualization. He defined an individual's operational codes as a set of foundational beliefs about the nature of the political universe and the effective strategies and tactics that an actor could employ in dealing with other political agents. George suggested that by assessing an individual's likely responses to ten questions, we could identify the operational code of that political leader.<sup>3</sup>

For roughly thirty years after George defined his question set, the primary technique used to assess 'answers' to these questions (for elites who could not be directly asked) entailed qualitative at-a-distance analysis. This involved assessing the sum of the content of the individual's written or spoken communication using psycho-historical techniques.<sup>4</sup> Though scholars occasionally employed quantitative content analysis tools when the sample of communications was large,<sup>5</sup> before the 1990s there was no widely employed systematic quantitative technique in use. Moreover, human coding of speech acts was a laborious and time-consuming task fraught with reliability concerns (Rasler, Thompson, and Chester 1980). A renewed investigation into the construction of reliable content analysis schemes for assessing the operational codes of foreign policy leaders began in the mid-1990s as advances in computer-aided text processing of natural language generated the promise of reliable and large-scale automated coding. Walker, Schafer, and Young (1998) in an article titled "Systematic Procedures for Operational Code Analysis," introduced the "Verbs In Context System" (VICS) method and the technique. Since that time, a PC-based software tool has emerged to facilitate coding with this technique, which has been applied in dozens of analyses.<sup>6</sup>

The Verbs in Context System is a quantitative content analysis scheme rooted in social attribution theory. It takes as its unit of observation the

politically relevant transitive verbs contained in the speech acts of a particular individual. The grammatical subjects, verbs, and objects in these statements provide an indication of an individual's mental representation of 'who is doing what to whom and how,' thereby revealing his or her mental representation of the political universe. Verbs are classified according to their valence (positive or negative), tense (past, present, or future), and type (words or deeds). Each verb along with its grammatical subject (either self or other) and object (for domain) constitutes a unit of observation, however the unit of analysis in VICS is the complete verbal act (speech, press conference, etc.) and so these verb scores are aggregated by speech into VICS indicators. These indices correspond to George's Op-Code questions on a speech-by-speech basis.<sup>7</sup>

The strength of VICS analysis as an at-a-distance measure lies in its reduced emphasis on the surface content of the communication (which might be manipulated for instrumental purposes or audience effect) in favor of attention to deeper systematic patterns of positive or negative self or other attributions generated by the speaker.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, because the VICS is a computer-based technique it has proven to be highly reliable for the indicators we employ here.

As Walker and Schafer (2003) observe, op-code beliefs may operate on a number of levels with regard to the relationship between the individual his or her environment and subsequent behavior. First, op-codes act as 'mirrors' (with some distortion) of the 'real' political environment and, therefore, should reflect changes in the external conditions. Second, op-code beliefs may act as 'steering mechanisms' that dynamically filter incoming information and shape an individual's preferences and future choices. Third op-code beliefs may also reflect 'learning processes' that can range from subtle shifts in tactical choices to significant transformation of an individual's beliefs following major events.

We seek to demonstrate how the events of the 1990 and 1994 elections produced an altered political environment mirrored in the changing op-code indicators for the two presidents. It may also be the case that in the more extreme instances (or for particular individuals) midterms generate extensive effects that facilitate significant belief change over time. Changed beliefs should then translate into changed presidential behavior or choice of tactics. As Stephen Walker and Mark Schafer describe the linkage: "Over time, beliefs may alter as new information (perceptions) reinforces or reverses old information (beliefs). This dynamic influences the nature of their critical causal impact on the choice of action" (2003, 4). In the 1990 and 1994 cases, presidents may have learned new information that reinforced or reversed established beliefs. By examining the presidential statements before

and after the election, we can chart the continuity and alternation of existing beliefs.

In particular, we examine the impact of midterm results upon four aspects of presidential beliefs particularly susceptible to learning effects. First, we explore each president's important philosophical beliefs about how they operate in office, known (in accordance with George's Philosophical questions) as "P-1" and "P-4."

P-1: What is the "essential" nature of political life? Is the political universe essentially one of harmony or conflict? What is the fundamental character of one's opponents?

P-4: How much "control" or "mastery" can one have over historical development? What is one's role in "moving" and "shaping" history in the desired direction?

Presumably, negative midterm results increase presidential perceptions of conflict and decrease a president's sense of control or mastery of his environment. Second, we assess instrumental beliefs about how presidents believe they should conduct themselves in office, and which tactics they believe are appropriate given their sense of control and perception of the political environment. This indicator is defined in operation code as "I-1."

I-1: What is the best approach for selecting goals or objectives for political action?

Adverse midterm results may encourage presidents to rethink their previous approaches. A president with previously combative beliefs may embrace more cooperative views and a president with previously accommodative beliefs may adopt more adversarial viewpoints.

### **Hypotheses and Research Design**

This discussion of the Operational Code construct and the specific factors we intend to examine leads to the articulation of three hypotheses that reflect the mirroring aspects of the op-code indicators. Since virtually all midterms elections represent political setbacks for the incumbent president and portend a more difficult legislative environment, we anticipate that (*H1*) presidents should perceive the world as more conflictual and therefore exhibit lower 'nature of the political universe' (P-1) scores following an election when compared to prior periods. By increasing the number of opposing partisans in Congress, midterm setbacks threaten to reduce the ability of the president to set the legislative agenda and shape the political



discourse in Washington. We anticipate that (*H2*) presidents should exhibit 'lower locus of control' (P-4) scores after an election than in prior periods.

An ancillary hypothesis to these first two hypotheses suggests that (*H3*) the magnitude of the difference between pre- and post-election indicators should be positively related to the magnitude of the midterm setback as measured in loss of Congressional and Senate seats. For the cases we have selected this implies larger indicator changes for Clinton than for Bush I.

With regard to instrumental beliefs that reflect a learning experience in response to the changing political environment, the task of articulating expected movement is more complex. Ultimately, the 'Approach to Goals' I-1 score could move in one of three ways. It could become lower indicating that the president has shifted toward more adversarial and confrontational tactics in response to the setback. It could rise, indicating a more cooperative and accommodative response to the new environment. It could remain unchanged, suggesting that learning may not have occurred. In addition, it might also vary in magnitude. Our heuristic here is to consider the midterm setback as a repudiation of prior tactical activity. If learning occurs, it should represent a change relative to some prior state. This leads us to hypothesize that (*H4*) presidents who had perceived themselves as being cooperative (high I-1 'Approach to Goals' scores prior to the election) should be more inclined to shift toward an adversarial position (lower I-1 scores), while those who had seen themselves as more combative (lower I-1 scores) will move toward an accommodative position. Since, to some degree, this phenomenon might merely represent statistical regression to the mean, we additionally hypothesize that (*H5*) the magnitude of this shift increase with the size of the midterm election setback.

To test these hypotheses we selected two cases of midterm elections that were designated as 'normal' by the most prominent study of midterm elections but that also evinced considerable variance in the number of Congressional seats lost by the president's party. In addition to the large variance on the independent variable, these cases are attractive targets for analysis because both are modern presidential administrations with extensive records made of the verbal acts and political rhetoric of each leader. Their temporal proximity also limits the effects of changing domestic and international events, media habits and electoral processes.

We consulted the Public Papers of the Presidents (in their on-line form) to identify a sample of speech acts for each president for the period 12 months prior to, and 6 months following, the midterm election.<sup>9</sup> Only documents representing actual verbal utterances by the president (speeches, addresses, and remarks) that were approximately 1000 words in length or longer were included in the sample. We excluded solely written pronouncements, proclamations, message, greetings, and press releases and any verbal

act substantially less than our 1000 word threshold.<sup>10</sup> Out of concern that the run-up to the First Persian Gulf War in 1991 would skew the scores on conflict for President Bush, we also excluded any speech act that was predominantly foreign policy related (we used a 50% rule by paragraph to identify these documents). We grouped the speech acts into six-month periods representing what we termed governance, campaign, and post-election phases. We employed several differing temporal classifications in our analysis and found no “period effects” that skewed our results when employing our six-month time frames. We thus are confident of the reliability of our temporal classifications. Table 1 presents the sample sizes of speech acts for each president. The mean number of politically relevant coded verbs per speech act for Bush I was 57.5 and for the notoriously garrulous Clinton 74.5.<sup>11</sup>

We cleaned this sample of documents of any content not generated by the president (questions in press conferences or content from other leaders in joint press conferences) and then entered them into the Profiler+ software package for automated VICS content analysis.<sup>12</sup> The P-1, P-4, and I-1 scores for each speech act were collected and used for our analysis. In the VICS, the P-1 ‘nature of the political universe’ index is constructed by subtracting the percentage of negative valenced other attributions (i.e., relevant verbs where the subject is not self and the action is uncooperative) from the percentage of positively valenced other attributions in the speech act. This index can range from -1 (highly conflictual others) to 1 (entirely cooperative others). The I-1 score is similarly calculated by subtracting the percentage of negatively valenced self-attributions from the percentage of positively valenced self-attributions and can range from -1 to 1. The P-4 locus of control VICS indicator is the ratio of self-attributions to total attributions. Values above .5 therefore indicate that the proportion of self-attributions is above 50%; however, few leaders generally approach this level of egocentrism.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 1. Sample Size of Presidential Speech Acts by Period**

Phases for President Bush	Speeches per Period	Phases for President Clinton	Speeches per Period
Governing Nov. 6, 1989 to May 6, 1990	135	Governing Nov. 8, 1993 to May 8, 1994	186
Campaign May 6, 1990 to Nov. 6, 1990	146	Campaign May 8, 1994 to Nov. 8, 1994	223
Post-Election Nov. 6, 1990 to May 6, 1991	97	Post-Election Nov. 8, 1994 to May 8, 1995	142
Total	378	Total	551

**Analysis and Results**

We used Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) techniques with period as the grouping variable to assess the presence of change in the three VICS indicators. Since our hypotheses focus on change within each president’s scores, and not on cross-case comparison of absolute values of scores, we conducted separate ANOVA statistical analyses for each president.<sup>14</sup> Although the speech act is the unit of analysis in the VICS, because of the substantial variance in speech size within periods (from dozens to hundreds of verbs) it is inaccurate to assume that each speech act should carry equal weight in the calculation of mean and variance scores per period. Consequently, we weighted each VICS indicator by the number of relevant verbs in the speech when conducting the ANOVA analyses.

Table 2 presents the results of 12 separate Weighted ANOVA analyses between periods 1 and 2, and periods 2 and 3 for each president across each of the three indicators. The results confirm that significance of the differences across periods as shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3. In our subsequent analysis, all of the differences across periods for each case possess high levels of statistical significance due to the large Ns and substantial differences in belief scores.

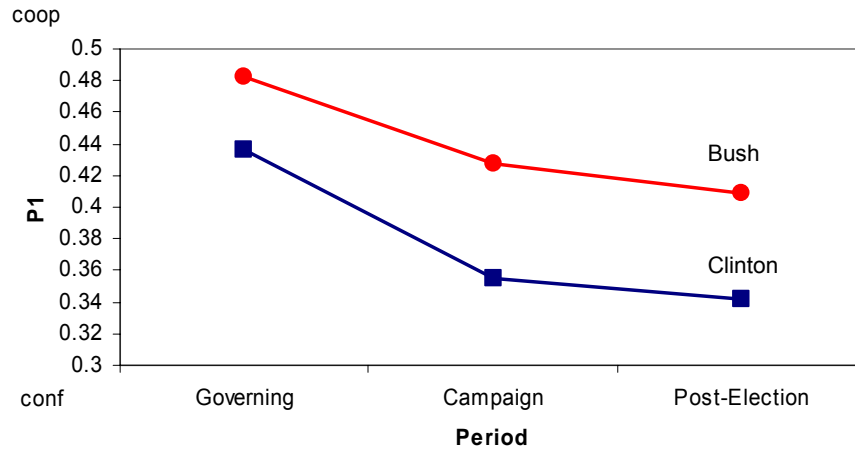
Figure 1 depicts the estimated marginal mean scores for the P-1 ‘Nature of the Political Universe’ index by period for Presidents Bush and Clinton. These scores represent the pattern of other attributions present in each confirms that significant differences exist in the scores for both leaders across the three time periods (for Clinton F 850.45, 3 df,  $p < .001$ ; for Bush F 647.4, 3 df,  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 2. Weighted ANOVA Analyses Between Periods**

Indicator	President	Period	F	Sig.	N
P-1 (Fig. 1)	Clinton	1-2	1420.54	.000	409
		2-3	863.67	.000	365
	Bush	1-2	892.39	.000	281
		2-3	562.69	.000	243
P-4 (Fig. 2)	Clinton	1-2	2938.16	.000	409
		2-3	2511.52	.000	365
	Bush	1-2	1790.41	.000	281
		2-3	1404.24	.000	243
I-1 (Fig. 3)	Clinton	1-2	1431.90	.000	409
		2-3	1013.48	.000	365
	Bush	1-2	661.19	.000	281
		2-3	1004.79	.000	243

Note: df = 2 for all analyses

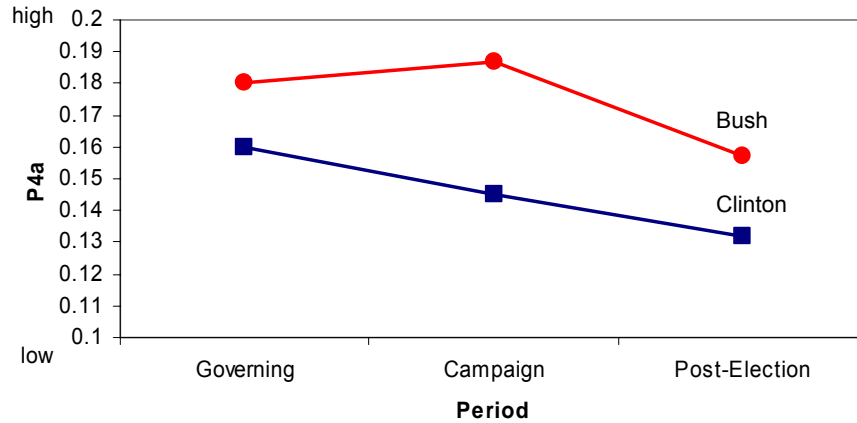
**Figure 1. Nature of the Political Universe (P-1) Scores by Six-month Period for Presidents Bush and Clinton**



The figure and the statistical results provide provisional support for hypothesis 1 that the that midterm election setbacks lead presidents to express more negative patterns of other attributions reflecting less cooperative beliefs about the nature of the political universe. A strong increase in conflictual beliefs appears during the verbally combative campaign period and continues into the post-election period. In addition, the magnitude of the shift for President Clinton between the Governing and Post-Election phases (.094 points) is larger than the shift exhibited in President Bush's rhetoric (.073). That this more pronounced shift occurs despite the fact that Bush's P-1 score begins at a higher absolute level (and so might be more likely to regress to the mean) suggests that our ancillary hypotheses (H3) regarding the relationship between the magnitude of the loss and the magnitude of the shift may also be correct for this index. However, the largest change between periods does not occur between the immediate pre- and post-election phases. The greatest shift toward less positive other attribution occurs between the governing and campaigning phases suggesting that the onset of the campaign is enough to significantly shift attribution patterns.

The estimated marginal mean scores for the P-4 'Locus of Control' index by period for Presidents Bush and Clinton appear in Figure 2. These scores represent the ratio of self-attribution to total attribution in each leader's verbal utterances. Both presidents reflect generally lower than average locus of control scores than do a group of 168 chief executives of varying nations when addressing foreign policy topics.<sup>16</sup> While these lower scores may be a result of the domestic context, both leaders P-4 scores fall

**Figure 2. Locus of Control (P-4) Scores by Six-month Period for Presidents Bush and Clinton**

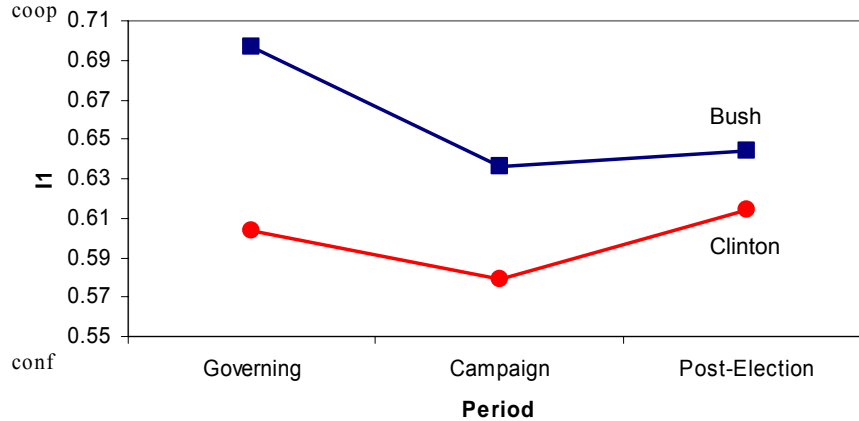


within one standard deviation ( $\pm .11$ ) of this mean value throughout the temporal range of our study. This fact suggests that neither president is extreme in their values on the VICS locus of control index. Again the ANOVA analysis confirms that significant differences exist in the scores for both leaders across the three periods (for Clinton  $F 1097.8, 3 \text{ df}, p < .001$ ; for Bush  $F 621.3, 3 \text{ df}, p < .001$ ).

The figure and the statistical results provide provisional support for hypothesis 2 that the midterm election setbacks lead presidents to feel less in control of their political environment. In addition, the magnitude of the shift for President Clinton between the Governing and Post-Election phases (.028 points lower) is larger than the shift exhibited in President Bush's rhetoric (.023 points lower). That this more pronounced shift occurs despite the fact that Clinton's P-4 score begin at a lower absolute level (and so might be more likely to regress upward toward the mean) suggests that our ancillary hypotheses (H3) regarding the relationship between the magnitude of the midterm setback and the decline in the locus of control indicator may also be correct for this index.

Interestingly, and in contrast to the P-1 index where the two leaders' scores moved virtually in parallel, the P-4 index change reveals some differences when we compare the presidents. Bush's P-4 score rises slightly but significantly between the governing and campaigning phases while Clinton's declines steadily from period 1 to period 3. If we surmise that it might be natural for a president to accentuate their activities, influence, and success during the campaign as a way of building support for candidates from their party, Clinton's decline in self-attributions is notable. It may be an indication

**Figure 3. Self Approach to Goals (I-1) Scores by Six-month Period for Presidents Bush and Clinton**



of the particularly hostile political environment he faced at the time that included confrontations over health care and the Whitewater investigation.

Figure 3 depicts the estimated marginal mean scores for the I-4 ‘Approach to Goals’ index by period for the two presidents. These scores represent the pattern of self-attributions present in each leader’s verbal utterances. Higher numbers indicate a tendency to associate oneself with cooperative behavior. Both presidents reflect substantially higher I-4 scores than the mean among a group of 168 chief executives of varying nations in their foreign policy statements.<sup>17</sup> We attribute this to the less combative nature of domestic public discourse. Again the ANOVA analysis confirms that significant differences exist in the scores for both leaders across the periods (for Clinton  $F = 1115.1, 3 \text{ df}, p < .001$ ; for Bush  $F = 444.9, 3 \text{ df}, p < .001$ ).

Recalling our hypothesis regarding learning (H4), we suggested that presidents may view the midterm setback as a repudiation of their prior tactics. Learning in response to this negative feedback may lead to an alteration of their approach to goals that reverses their prior tendencies. More cooperative presidents should become less so, while less cooperative presidents should become more so. Although we have only two cases for comparison, it appears that indeed the more cooperative president (Clinton) demonstrated a substantial lessening of his cooperation score between the governing and post-election phase (.053 points lower). Conversely, the president with the lower initial and overall I-1 scores (Bush) demonstrated an increase in his I-1 scores (.10 points) between the governing and post-election phase. Interestingly, both leaders displayed their lowest levels of

cooperative self-attribution during the campaign period and both moved to higher index levels in the post-election phase (compared to the levels in the immediate prior period). This trend is important because the upward movement of the indicator is counter to any regression trend and because the post-election increase reflects the common post-election tendency to accentuate the need for cooperation and shared responsibility in Washington.

Our confidence in the findings regarding the learning hypothesis, despite the limited number of cases, grows from the fact that the magnitude of change (in absolute terms) is positively related to the size of the midterm setback (H5). President Clinton exhibits a much larger movement in his I-1 indicator from the governing to the post-election phases compared to Bush's rather meager change. This is illustrative of a more profound shift in the pattern of self-attribution displayed by Clinton in response to a more pronounced electoral rebuke.

### **Conclusion**

The empirical results above reveal how midterm elections were personal political ordeals for Bill Clinton and the first President Bush. Both presidents evidenced a sharp increase in conflictual descriptions of their environments (P-1 scores) during the midterm campaign period, and voiced even more such descriptions in the aftermath of the midterm elections. Their sense of locus of control (P-4 scores) also dropped significantly after the 1990 and 1994 midterm elections. Both presidents responded to the bad midterm news by changing their instrumental approaches (I-1 scores) from those of the pre-campaign governing period. Bush voiced a more cooperative approach after the 1990 elections. Clinton, though more cooperative in his post-election rhetoric than during the campaign, was much less cooperative in his statements after the elections than he was in the pre-campaign period. But the Bush setback was small compared to the sweeping loss of his party's control of Congress suffered by Clinton. In Bush's case, we view the increase in cooperative statements as a rational adaptation to depleted political resources. Clinton, however, was bound to become more conflictual in his statements given that Congressional leaders came from a rival party with a rival agenda. The agenda differences between president and Congress went from narrow to vast after the 1994 elections. Even so, Clinton issued more cooperative statements in the 1995 post-election period than did Bush in 1990. Cooperative language still had great usefulness after the midterm ordeals of 1990 and 1994.

The utility of cooperative language in the post-election period is evident in the subsequent legislative records of the presidents. Each president needed Congressional cooperation for important initiatives and found

themselves with fewer bargaining resources beyond the negative sanction of the veto. President Bush would soon seek Congressional authorization to prosecute a war against Iraq. President Clinton hoped to reduce the deficit and reform welfare programs. Both presidents achieved these goals, admittedly though a series of conflicts with Congressional opponents, but ultimately the results came from constructive agreements with the legislature. The major accomplishments of the post-midterm years for these presidents arrived via cooperation with Congress.

Each president voiced some cooperative attitudes toward Congress in the first post-election press appearances. President Clinton began his remarks to the press by claiming that he and GOP Congressional leaders were “ready to work together to serve all the American people in a non-partisan manner.” Addressing the Republican leaders, Clinton invited cooperation: “I reach out to them today, and I ask them to join me in the center of the public debate where the best ideas for the next generation of American progress must come” (Clinton 1994). President Bush, reflecting his less cooperative average evident in our data analysis, voiced a few defiant sentiments at his press conference but also urged cooperation: “But look, there are going to be certain things where we will continue to try to work with the Congress. . . . On some, I’m going to be appealing strongly for Democratic support and in some I’m going to use the veto so as to stop a lot of bad things from happening to this country” (Bush 1990).

Though Bush’s statements remained less cooperative than were Clinton’s after the midterms, this did not prevent Congress in January 1991 from endorsing a war to free Kuwait from Iraqi control and supporting Bush on 54 percent of the legislation on which he took positions in that year. The relationship between Bush and Congress deteriorated markedly in 1992, approving only 43 percent of his positions (Stanley and Niemi 2000, 253) as memories of the Iraq war faded, the economy weakened, and Bush’s popularity steadily dropped. Although Clinton’s statements became slightly more cooperative after the election and remained more so than were Bush’s in 1990, the newly Republican Congress thoroughly stymied Clinton in 1995. The legislature approved only 36.3 percent of his initiatives, and produced a controversial government shutdown over budget differences in the autumn of that year. Clinton rebounded nicely in 1996, receiving support for 55.1 of his positions, including a long-term budget-balancing plan and historic welfare reform (Stanley and Niemi 2000, 253). His approach of “triangulation” by adopting positions between Congressional Democrats and Republicans smoothed the way for increased cooperation (Morris 1997, 158-266).

The divergent patterns unearthed in our analysis may reach beyond George H.W. Bush’s less cooperative attitude than that of Bill Clinton. These differences force us to qualify any claim that we have found a



“normal” pattern of presidential belief change during midterm elections. President Clinton’s post-election statements reveal a much greater sense of loss of control and conflict in his environment than did those of President Bush. These greater magnitudes may indicate a difference in kind, not just a difference in degree, in the midterm effect upon presidents. The midterm election in 1994 may have not just been a bad “normal” midterm, but an unusually severe reversal creating a sharply different political terrain that the astute politician Clinton grasped immediately.

Only further research can demonstrate the accuracy of this speculation. It is now possible to examine the operational code of presidents for all cases where there is an adequate record of presidential statements in computer-analyzable form. We intend to extend this analysis beyond the 1990 and 1994 cases to other temporal periods. Perhaps the Clinton case in 1994 is an outlier. If so, it may be one important manifestation in presidential beliefs of a major and lasting change in electoral behavior. Alternatively, it may be merely one example of the midterm election syndrome for presidents: perceptions of rising conflict, declining control, and adoption of cooperative rhetoric as an accommodation to reduced power resources.

The central finding, however, is clear here: midterm elections can have important effects on presidential beliefs. Their power as an independent variable remains a promising avenue of research for revealing the connection between mass elections and the beliefs of ruling elites. For it is clear from our evidence that the 1990 and 1994 election results changed the way William Jefferson Clinton and George Herbert Walker Bush publicly discussed the political world and their places in it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>As we mention later in the text, we control for foreign policy statements in this analysis by eliminating all speech acts by paragraph if it included more than 50 percent foreign policy content. We did this to prevent the run-up to the 1991 Persian Gulf War from skewing conflict scores for President Bush and to keep the focus more closely on midterm election politics.

<sup>2</sup>Prominent examples of this type of scholarship David Winter’s ‘Personality-at-Distance approach’ (Winter and Stewart 1977), and Suedfeld and Tetlock’s ‘Integrative Complexity’ measures (Suedfeld and Tetlock 1977). For a review of this literature see Michael D. Young and Mark Schafer (1998).

<sup>3</sup>George separated his questions into Philosophical and Instrumental subsets. The five philosophical questions: What is the “essential” nature of political life—is it essentially one of harmony or conflict? What are the prospects for the eventual realization of one’s fundamental values and aspirations? To what extent is the political future predictable? How much control or mastery can one have over historical development? What is the role of “chance” in human affairs and in historical development? The five instrumental questions: What is the best approach for selecting goals or objectives for political

action? How are the goals of action pursued most effectively? How are the risks of political action calculated, controlled, and accepted? What is the best timing of action to advance one's interests? What is the utility and role of different means for advancing one's interests?

<sup>4</sup>See George (1969), George (1979), Holsti (1977), Walker (1977), and Hoagland and Walker (1979) for examples of qualitative approaches to the study of operational codes and Walker (1990) for a review of this literature.

<sup>5</sup>For example, see Selim, Mohammed El-Sayed (1979).

<sup>6</sup>See Walker and Schafer (2003) for a review of this literature.

<sup>7</sup>For details regarding the calculation of these indices, see the research design section.

<sup>8</sup>See Larson (1988) for a discussion of the problems of using verbal content to make inferences about cognitive variables through at-a-distance content analysis.

<sup>9</sup>Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, various dates. Available on-line at [american-presidency.org](http://american-presidency.org) [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/) or at the Government Printing Office Internet Service [www.access.gpo.gov/nara/pubpaps/srhpaps.html](http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/pubpaps/srhpaps.html).

<sup>10</sup>An exception to this 1000 word minimum was made for Clinton's weekly radio address, which was consistently between 900 and 1000 words in length.

<sup>11</sup>The standard deviations for these distributions were 26.9 and 50.1 respectively. However, these dispersion measures are exaggerated by the presence of a few very long speeches. The minimum number of politically relevant verbs in a speech act for Bush was 14, for Clinton it was 16.

<sup>12</sup>Profiler+ is a product of Social Science Automation Corporation—[www.socialscienceautomation.com](http://www.socialscienceautomation.com).

<sup>13</sup>Prior research in areas of foreign policy speeches by 168 chief executives from various nations has identified a 'norming' mean score for the P-1 indicator of roughly .28; for the I-1 score it is .35. We anticipate that indicators based on analyses of domestic speeches should result in generally higher scores than these. However since change, and not absolute level, is our concern, the presence of differences between domestic and foreign scores is not problematic. For the locus of control indicator P-4 the norming mean for foreign policy speeches by world leaders is .20 (20% self attributions). We would like to thank Mark Schafer for providing these statistics.

<sup>14</sup>Ultimately, cross-actor differences in VICS scores could result from any number of factors including personality, experience, and context. While such an analysis could be conducted using the present data and the significance of any difference by president determined, any attempt at explaining this variation in scores would only be meaningful if the number of cases (presidents) was large enough to allow for the multiple independent and control variables.

<sup>15</sup>The Bush and Clinton scores are significantly above the norming group mean of .28. This is the mean score of a group of 168 chief executives of differing nations in their foreign policy statements, employed in Malici 2005, 2006; Heng 2005; Schafer, Robison, and Aldrich 2006; and Schafer and Walker 2006. It is not surprising that Bush and Clinton would have more positive outlooks than this group of 168, since the "other" in this case includes domestic political actors, not rival nations.

<sup>16</sup>The norming mean on locus of control of 168 chief executives of differing nations addressing foreign policy issues is .20. See in Malici 2005, 2006; Heng 2005; Schafer, Robison, and Aldrich 2006; and Schafer and Walker 2006 for more information on this measure.

<sup>17</sup>The norming mean for foreign policy speeches by 168 chief executives of differing nations on difference of goals scores is .35. See in Malici 2005, 2006; Heng 2005; Schafer, Robison, and Aldrich 2006; and Schafer and Walker 2006 for more information.

## REFERENCES

- Barber, James David. 1972. *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Busch, Andrew E. 1999. *Horses in Midstream: U.S. Midterm Elections and Their Consequences, 1898-1998*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Bush, George Herbert Walker. 1990. Remarks Announcing the Resignation of William J. Bennett as Director of National Drug Control Policy and a Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters November 8, 1990. *Public Papers of the Presidents*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Campbell, James E. 1997. The Presidential Pulse and the 1994 Midterm Election. *Journal of Politics* 59:830-857.
- Campbell, James E. 1991. The Presidential Surge and its Midterm Decline in Congressional Elections, 1868-1988. *Journal of Politics* 53:477-487.
- Clinton, William Jefferson. 1994. Presidential News Conference November 9, 1994. *Public Papers of the Presidents*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Cook, Charlie. 1999. The President's Plummeting Poll Numbers. National Journal.com: June 1.
- Day of Decision: What Decision? 1990. *New York Times*. November 7, A30.
- Feng, Huiyun. 2005. The Operational Code of Mao Zedong: Defensive or Offensive Realist? *Security Studies* 14:637-662.
- George, Alexander L. 1969. The Operational Code: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision Making. *International Studies Quarterly* 23:190-222.
- George, Alexander L. 1979. The Causal Nexus between Beliefs and Behavior. Pp. 95-124 in *Psychological Models in International Politics*, ed. L. Falkowski. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- George, Alexander, and Juliette L. George, eds. 1998. *Presidential Personality and Performance*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Greenstein, Fred I. 1989. *Personality and Politics*. Chicago: Markham.
- Hoagland, S., and S. Walker 1979. Operational Codes and Crisis Outcomes. Pp. 125-198 in *Psychological Models in International Politics*, ed. L. Falkowski. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Holsti, O. 1977. The Operational Code as an Approach to the Analysis of Belief Systems. Final Report to the National Science Foundation, Grant No. SOC 75-15368. Durham, NC: Duke University.
- Larson, Deborah W. 1988. Problems of Content Analysis in Foreign-Policy Research: Notes from the Study of the Origins of Cold War Belief Systems. *International Studies Quarterly* 32:241-255.
- Leites, Nathan. 1953. *A Study of Bolshevism*. New York: Free Press.
- Leites, Nathan. 1951. *The Operational Code of the Politburo*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Malici, Akan. 2006. Germans as Venetians: The Culture of German Foreign Policy Behavior. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 2:37-62.

- Malici, Akan. 2005. Discord and Collaboration between Allies. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49:90-119.
- Morris, Dick. 1997. *Behind the Oval Office: Winning the White House in the Nineties*. New York: Random House.
- Neustadt, Richard E. 1990. *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*. New York: Free Press.
- Petrocik, John R., and Frederick T. Steeper. 1986. The Midterm Referendum: The Importance of Attributions of Responsibility. *Political Behavior* 8:206-229.
- Pious, Richard M. 1979. *The American Presidency*. New York: Basic Books.
- Rasler, Karen, William R. Thompson, and Kathleen Chester. 1980. Foreign Policy Makers, Personality Attributes and Interviews: A Note on Reliability Problems. *International Studies Quarterly* 24:47-66.
- Renshon, Stanley A. 1996. *The Psychological Assessment of Presidential Candidates*. New York: NYU Press.
- Republican Gains and Obligations. 1994. *New York Times*. November 9, A26.
- Selim, Mohammed El-Sayed. 1979. The Operational Code of Belief System and Foreign Policy Decision Making: The Case of Gamal Abdel-Nasser. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Carleton University.
- Schafer, Mark, and Stephen Walker. 2006. *Beliefs and Leadership in World Politics: Methods and Applications of Operational Code Analysis*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Schafer, Mark, Sam Robison, and Bradley Aldrich. 2006. Operational Codes and the Easter Rising in Ireland: A Test of the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 2:63-82.
- Schneider, William. 1990. The In-Box President. *The Atlantic Monthly* 265:34-43.
- Snyder, Richard C., H.W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin. 1954. Foreign Policy Decision-Making as an Approach to the Study of International Politics. Foreign Policy Analysis Project Series, No. 3. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Sprout, Harold, and Margaret Sprout. 1956. *Man-Milieu Relationship Hypotheses in the Context of International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Center of International Studies at Princeton University.
- Stanley, Harold W., and Niemi, Richard G. 2000. *Vital Statistics on American Politics*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Suedfeld, Peter, and Philip E. Tetlock. 1977. Integrative Complexity of Communications in International Crises. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 21:168-178.
- Walker, Stephen G., and Mark Schafer. 2003. The Contributions of Operational Code Analysis to Foreign Policy Theory: Beliefs as Causal Mechanisms. Manuscript prepared for *Advances in Foreign Policy Analysis Yearbook*, ed. Alex Mintz. Forthcoming, Palgrave.
- Walker, Stephen G., Mark Schafer, and Micheal Young. 1998. Systematic Procedures for Operational Code Analysis. *International Studies Quarterly* 42:175-190.
- Winter, David G., and Abigail Stewart. 1977. Content Analysis as a Method of Studying Political Leaders. In *A Psychological Examination of Political Leaders*, ed. Margaret Hermann. New York: Free Press.
- Young, Michael, and March Schafer. 1998. Is there Method in our Madness? Ways of Assessing Cognition in International Relations. *Mershon International Studies Review* 42:63-96.