Introduction to the special issue: Elections, rhetoric and American foreign policy in the age of Donald Trump

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Abstract

This introduction presents the special issue's conceptual and empirical starting points and situates the special issue's intended contributions. It does so by reviewing extant scholarship on electoral rhetoric and foreign policy and by teasing out several possible linkages between elections, rhetoric and foreign policy. It also discusses how each contribution to the special issue seeks to illuminate causal mechanisms at work in these linkages. Finally, it posits that these linkages are crucial to examining the changes brought about by Trump's election and his foreign policy rhetoric.

This special issue examines the significance of the 2016 election and of the first years of Trump's presidency, considering how they have changed and challenged the norms, style, and content of American foreign policy discourse. Ever since Donald Trump's surprising victory in 2016, a great deal of research has been exploring new trends in contemporary American domestic politics and foreign policy. Scholars have examined the rise of populism, crisis talk, racially charged discourse, as well as arguably unprecedented degrees of partisanship and polarisation (Chernobrov, 2019; Homolar and Scholz, 2019; Jacobson, 2017; Lacatus, 2019; MacWilliams, 2016; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Trubowitz and Harris, 2019). Others have focused on Trump's (and the Trump administration's) rhetorical style and modes of communication (Appel, 2018; Bostdorff, 2017; McDonough, 2018; Savoy,

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2018; Wang and Liu, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic and the United States' response to it have put the interlinkage, including many puzzling divides, between elections, rhetoric and policy (including foreign policy) into particular focus.

Based on often unstructured and improvised statements in pronouncements in rallies, interviews, and in social media, Trump's policy positions on free trade, immigration, alliances, treaties, international law, and international cooperation seemed to fly in the face of what was frequently assumed to be a broad-based, post-World War II consensus of America's role in the world (Edwards, 2018; Stokes, 2018). To some commentators, the election signalled the end of liberal democracy paralleling US decline, with Trump's worldview representing 'a frontal assault on the core convictions of the post-war US global project' (Ikenberry, 2017; also: Dumbrell, 2010). After all, traditional party politics were assumed to stop at the water's edge or, at the very least, to be more measured when it came to foreign policy and national interests. In this regard, Trump's electoral success supposedly marks a turning point, as he advertised against core liberal values assumed to form the foundation of US foreign policy – trade agreements, alliances, international law, multilateralism, environmental protection, protection from torture, and human rights (Ikenberry, 2017).

Predictions that Trump would change his style as he was socialised into the responsibility of his office and become more 'presidential' turned out to be mistaken, as Trump continued to hold rallies and tweet actively (Holland and Fermor, 2017). Approaching his fourth year in office, the jury is still out on whether we see potentially catastrophic disruption or surprising continuity in terms of Trump's foreign policy proposals and decisions, compared with his own campaign promises and also in relation to previous administrations (Abrams, 2017; Herbert et al., 2019; Macdonald, 2018; Sperling and Webber, 2019; Stokes, 2018; Wolf, 2017). In important ways, the public rhetoric of his presidency has remained the same as the position of presidential candidate Trump in 2016. However, his administration's foreign policy decisions have not always aligned with campaign promises or with the content of Trump's own communication via social media, press conferences, and rallies. Whether or not commentators agree on the role of political rhetoric in politics more broadly, there is little doubt that Trump's rhetoric on foreign policy, his electoral success, and his subsequent foreign policy performance as president have challenged and continue to challenge many of our assumptions about US foreign policymaking. It is this very tension that lies at the centre of our special issue.

Contributions to this special issue examine US electoral dynamics past and present, with an eye on foreign policy. More specifically, they explore patterns in electoral behaviour, probing causal mechanisms that can explain the relationship between rhetoric and foreign policy at election time. They focus on what recent candidates to the US presidency say on the campaign trail, and what implications and consequences this has for US foreign policy. They do so in different ways: first, they explore how presidential candidates make strategic use of public rhetoric in presidential campaigns to position themselves as distinct from other counter-candidates on foreign policy issues. They seek to situate these rhetorical positions in the historical and comparative context of previous elections in the US. Second, they offer a comprehensive view of Trump's electoral rhetoric by exploring virtually all main means of official communication on foreign policy used during the election campaign and in the aftermath of the election. They examine the main tropes Trump has used to advance an image of the US that is infused with far-right populist ideas, presenting it as militarily and financially powerful and, all the while, a victim of other states' pursuit of their national interests. Finally, they consider the

implications that these rhetorical choices have on foreign policy after Trump's victory, tracing the persistence of rhetoric beyond the campaign trail into his presidency, and finally into the 2020 elections.

In the next section, we present our conceptual starting points, situate the special issue's intended contribution by reviewing extant scholarship on electoral rhetoric and foreign policy, and discuss causal linkages crucial to examining the changes brought about by Trump's election and rhetoric on foreign policy.

Framing our contribution

Literature on the intersection of domestic debate, rhetoric and foreign policy is surprisingly scarce, especially in the subfield of foreign policy analysis (Johnstone and Priest, 2017: 2). This may have to do with an assumption that rhetoric and 'actual' state behaviour frequently and consistently misalign (Browne and Dickson, 2010; McCrisken, 2011), and that drivers other than communicated intentions influence foreign policy choice to a much greater degree (e.g. the geopolitical environment, national or economic interests, or ideational factors). The sense might still prevail that foreign policy issues do not matter much to voters, and/or that they (therefore) do not consistently feature in elections (Aldrich et al., 1989). With this special issue, we seek to show that the study of language and rhetoric in the context of elections does enhance our understanding of foreign policy behaviour.

In broad strokes, foreign policy rhetoric concerns the spoken, written, and, more rarely, visual communication used publicly by politicians in reference to foreign policy. It is thus a subset of what Aristotle defined as political rhetoric – arguments that weigh alternative courses of action relating to governmental tasks such as taxation, war, and legislation. Indeed, foreign policy rhetoric is conventionally aimed at selling, justifying, or otherwise communicating content about foreign policy, for example, its goals, processes, or outcomes, to a wide variety of audiences by means of persuasive argumentation (Condor et al., 2013: 2), but may well have additional purposes (e.g. signalling something about the character of the speaker). It is a linguistic as well as strategic practice (leaning on classical definitions by, e.g. Quintilian and Aristotle). Just as other political rhetoric, foreign policy rhetoric may include the use of rhetorical figures (Ferrari, 2007), slogans or keywords (Hart et al., 2004; Kephart and Rafferty, 2009), humour (Timmerman et al., 2012), and a wide variety of other rhetorical devices (for an overview: Condor et al., 2013: 265–266; Garsten, 2011). Audiences for foreign policy rhetoric may include foreign policy elites, decision-makers, advisers, politicians, journalists, donors, or lobby groups. They may also include wider sub-sections of the general public, such as voters, or they may be addressed at unspecified audiences and even globally. As such, foreign policy rhetoric is not bound to a specific medium or communication style: it can be spoken in person, televised, written, and tweeted, in formal public debate or in everyday political exchange.

Like Tulis (2017), we consider the use of rhetoric central to presidential governance, as it allows presidents to make strategic use of communication with the public and engage it to generate public support for their policymaking (also: Garsten, 2011; Medhurst, 2008; Stuckey, 2010; Stuckey and Antczak, 1998). Grounded in the common opinion that presidents should be popular leaders, strategic use of public rhetoric is equivalent to the promise of popular leadership and at the core of dominant interpretations of American political order. It acts as a pledge against 'gridlock' in a pluralistic constitutional system and as a

clear intention to prevent 'ungovernability' (Tulis, 2017). During electoral campaigns, the presidential candidates' use of public rhetoric to engage with the electorate is the principal, if not the sole, strategic tool they have at their disposal to shape their public image, differentiate themselves from other candidates, and propose a policy agenda. Significant in the context of our special issue, public rhetoric is the main channel of communication that campaigns can deploy tactically to advance their candidates' foreign policy positions, contest others' positions, and lay out future foreign policy strategy. This in turn affects, and is affected by, the actualised foreign policy of the United States that predates as well as follows elections. In this sense, current electoral rhetoric is important to contemporary and future presidential leadership in the United States as well as reflective of profound developments in American politics in recent decades.

The special issue interrogates those conceptual, causal, and empirical linkages that help elucidate the dynamics of foreign policy rhetorical positioning during and after elections. In politics, the realities encapsulated by the main concepts discussed in this special issue often overlap and are in fact hard to distinguish. By the same token, the articles in this special issue cannot cover the whole spectrum of conceptual avenues and of evidence about these associations and linkages. Still, they offer valuable insights into some of the key causal processes at work that link electoral rhetoric about foreign policy and foreign policymaking, including by grounding their arguments in the empirical analysis of American elections and foreign policy. In the following, we discuss how each contribution to the special issue seeks to illuminate causal mechanisms linking elections, rhetoric and foreign policy in this context.

Foreign policy rhetoric and electoral outcomes

Foreign policy rhetoric and elections are systematically interlinked, both generally in democracies and specifically in the United States. The sequence and recurrence of elections, the process of candidate choice in the primaries and elections, the sequence and relative importance of different communication channels and venues, and the overall make-up of the electorate matter for the type, frequency, and tone of foreign policy rhetoric as employed by American presidential candidates (Bernardi, 2020; Ili et al., 2012; Trent et al., 2011). Moreover, foreign policy rhetoric features prominently in US presidential elections not least because presidents wield broad powers to direct state power and military capabilities (Johnstone and Priest, 2017: 7). This increases the importance of what contenders for office say their goals or aspirations are. Indeed, rhetoric, including about foreign policy, is crucial to democratic political discourse because it provides the mechanism through which candidates vie for voters, and voters decide whom to vote for based on what they hear from and about the candidates (Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, 2016).

In so trying to convince voters, candidates may tailor their argument to the audience to which (as well as the context in which) they are talking (Condor et al., 2013: 12). They can side with one partial audience, and even ostracise another (Chernobrov, 2019), to clarify their policy positions and mobilise potential voters. Alternatively, to 'avoid being seen to side with a particular section of the audience or community [. . .]', a candidate may try to 'present an argument in such a way as to appear to incorporate a range of divergent points of view', or one that moves 'beyond [. . .] divisive arguments' (Condor et al., 2013: 18). However, in the context of elections, foreign policy rhetoric may be aimed not only at communicating policy positions. It is also about convincing the broader electorate, or more

specialised audiences of, variously, the candidate's expertise, authority, character, or suitability for the presidency (Johnstone and Priest, 2017: 4).

As Meibauer (2020) suggests in this special issue, incentives to speak authoritatively, in detail and on the stump to widely different audiences about complex foreign policy issues may lead candidates across the aisle to knowingly endorse suboptimal proposals, a motivation they subsequently seek to hide from the electorate. Meibauer argues that hyper-specific policy proposals are attractive because they signal competence and active leadership more than realistic, complex suggestions might. The need to maximise electoral coalitions during increasingly confrontational, personalized, and live-televised elections thus incentivises a focus on slogan-oriented rhetoric and the production of foreign policy 'bullshit'. Such rhetoric, if sufficiently ambiguous, can be used strategically to blur issue distinctions (Milita et al., 2017; Waldman and Jamieson, 2003). Alternatively, it may set an agenda favourable to the candidate, frame issues in specific ways, construct a 'character narrative' around the candidate, and resonate emotionally with the audience (Gadarian, 2010; Jerit, 2008; Medhurst, 2008). Indeed, it may not be rational argumentation but emotive narratives and 'stories' that win elections (Marcus, 2010). In the Trump campaign, for example, these storylines and personas tightly interlinked with popular culture and an anti-establishment ethos (Moon, 2020). This also usefully complements relevant literature focusing on Trump's supposed charisma (Aswad, 2019).

Several contributions in this special issue engage directly with a growing body of scholarship on the proliferation of populist ideas and their impact on foreign policy (rhetoric) in the context of the 2016 election and the first half of the Trump administration (Hall, 2020; Holland and Fermor, 2020; Lacatus, 2020). This special issue does not seek to engage in conceptual debates about the nature of populism as a form of political mobilisation (Jansen, 2011; Levitsky and Roberts, 2011; Weyland, 2001), an ideology (Mudde, 2007), or a type of discursive frame (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Hawkins, 2009; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Lacatus, 2019; Poblete, 2015; Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011). Rather, the contributors endorse the view that, at its core, populism is a form of political rhetoric predicated on the moral vilification of elites, who are seen as a threat to the 'people' and self-serving in their support for an undemocratic world order (Moffitt, 2015; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Rooduijn, 2014).

Trump makes use of far-right populist rhetoric to advance foreign policy claims of isolationism, illiberalism, and the need to protect American economic interests at all costs. In Trump's view, the goal of foreign policy is to promote the best interest of the real American people who have suffered economically from America's past record of entering 'bad deals'. Lacatus (2020) shows in this special issue that both candidate and president Trump's core argument is that the long-standing tradition of support for liberal democracy and liberal internationalism abroad has been a grave political and economic miscalculation with a negative impact on the American people's wealth, employment, and personal safety. As Hall (2020) argues in this special issue, Trump's rhetoric on the campaign trail fails to deliver a convincing position on foreign policy or a meaningful attempt to legitimate policy. Rather, his rhetoric is intended as a mechanism to reach his domestic base and perpetuate a sense of crisis to which only Trump, as a populist leader, can offer a solution. This instrumental use of rhetoric to advance emotionally appealing storylines persists after Trump's victory and well into his presidency. Holland and Fermor show that in the 2 years after electoral victory, the Trump administration sought to appeal to the public with the use of Jacksonian rhetoric with populist undertones by advancing the myth of the white working class as the very backbone of American identity.

While on the campaign trail, electoral candidates do not (yet) face the burdens of office. Hence, they have more leeway to suggest alternatives which are at the same time unlikely to be effective or implementable as well as (so they may think) likely to garner additional votes. A mismatch between facts and the rhetoric presidential contenders and their campaigns use may therefore not be altogether surprising (Hess, 1980). Correspondingly, relevant literature deals at length with different candidates' improbable promises, half-truths, and outright lies (Aldrich et al., 2006; Hess and Nelson, 1985; Iyengar and Simon, 2000; Johnstone and Priest, 2017; Lesperance, 2016; Miller and Shanks, 1982; Milner and Tingley, 2015; Nincic and Hinckley, 1991; Waltz, 1967). In this respect, Trump's position is no exception. Several contributors to this special issue show that, in fact, Trump's rhetorical engagement with foreign policy in his electoral campaign and after his victory has remained consistent (Hall, 2020; Holland and Fermor, 2020; Lacatus, 2020). However, this consistency of public discourse does not necessarily translate into a more credible means to legitimate foreign policy either on the campaign trail or in office.

In addition, foreign policy issues rarely, if ever, dominate elections in the United States, and the electorate consistently prioritises domestic matters (Johnstone and Priest, 2017: 7). As Boys (2020) suggests in this special issue, this presents presidential hopeful with strategic challenges, especially when seeking to advance a foreign policy agenda. How do candidates talk about foreign policy issues if they run on a predominantly domestic platform? Boys draws comparisons between the Clinton and Trump campaigns of 1992 and 2016, respectively, to suggest that the two campaigns share some similarities in their strategic use of foreign policy rhetoric to further domestic political themes and slogans. This is surprising given the fundamental difference in terms of the underpinning ideas and tone of their rhetoric.

In principle, there are limits to what electoral candidates can get away with: they risk being called out or fact-checked during election by voters or vigilant media if what they say (or how they say it) is untrue or otherwise falls outside the presumed norms of American political discourse. Evidently, the 2016 election and the Trump presidency have called into question the depth and durability of such discursive norms (Duval, 2019; Jamieson and Taussig, 2017 see also: Rose, 2017 on post-truth politics). Trump's electoral rhetoric prior to the 2016 election stood in stark contrast to the public discourse advanced by the Obama administration and by most other counter-candidates and presidential hopefuls. The strong mobilising effect Trump's rhetoric had on his supporters undoubtedly contributed to its electoral success (Hall, 2020). However, counter-intuitively, as Holland and Fermor (2020) argue in this special issue, part of the success that Trump's foreign policy rhetoric enjoyed may have been due to a strong initial resistance to it by political and media elites. This resistance failed to create a persuasive rhetorical alternative and thus reinforced Trump's discursive hegemony.

The interplay between foreign policy rhetoric and electoral incentives is causally linked to the actual conduct of US foreign policy. For one, US foreign policy past and present provides a context within which candidates vie for persuading voters. Interpretations of its success, effectiveness, righteousness, necessity, and so forth frame what incumbents and candidates formulate positions on, for example, what they say (and how) about foreign policy. If the United States is perceived to have a largely successful foreign policy, for example, candidates may wish to emphasise continuity, or focus on domestic issues instead. Similarly, if opponents are perceived to have weaknesses in dealing with foreign policy questions, raising such questions to the agenda might be

beneficial. How does a candidate's electoral foreign policy rhetoric interact with actualised foreign policy?

The effects of foreign policy rhetoric on foreign policy behaviour

Foreign policy rhetoric can be understood as turning the candidate's underlying ideas about foreign policy into contestable arguments (Finlayson, 2007: 552). Correspondingly, literature on US foreign policy identifies different ideational 'camps' that vie with each other over the accurate interpretation of geostrategic incentives, interests, and the appropriate ends to achieve desired goals. For example, numerous authors have debated 'traditions' (Mead, 2002) or grand strategic paradigms in US foreign policy (Dueck, 2004; Kohout et al., 1995; Nacht, 1995; Nau, 2002, 2013; Posen and Ross, 1996). In this case, electoral foreign policy rhetoric links with actualised foreign policy in that it expresses different ideational content that forms the basis of some possible future foreign policy direction. It rhetorically signals the future intent and aspirations of the speaker both in content and style, and the foreign policy of the president-elect supposedly by and large follows this rhetoric. This in turn affects how outsiders anticipate and use (discourses on) the direction of US foreign policy (Pan et al., 2020).

After electoral victory, there is commonly an expectation that the candidate (now president) will try to make good on their rhetoric. Their performance as president depends, at least to some degree, on how well their decision-making, legislative agenda, and/or general habitus correspond with what they communicated in primaries, presidential debates, speeches, and tweets. If presidents do not accomplish what they set out to achieve, that is, do not live up to voter expectation, they should expect to be punished at the ballot box (Mesquita et al., 2004; Waltz, 1967). From this perspective, elections function as an accountability mechanism that constrains both candidate rhetoric (in anticipation of future office) and actual foreign policy. Of course, the extent to which candidates and presidents are bound in such a way not least depends on the level of information available to the public (Baum, 2004). Still, this mechanism of incentivising candidates to openly lay out their foreign policy aspirations is principally assumed to make democratic foreign policy open and predictable.

Yet, as Payne (2020) suggests in this special issue, the effect of electoral constraints on presidential decision-making and US foreign policy may be belated, inconsistent, non-linear, and not easily observed in only specific time-periods (e.g. immediately before or after elections). Indeed, the Trump presidency brought to the surface not only a mismatch between campaign promises and the Trump administration's foreign position after electoral victory, but also a continuation of the distance between public rhetoric and actualised foreign policy. This contribution to the special issue broadens the scope of existing scholarship focused primarily on the initial decision to use force by examining the influence of electoral considerations on strategic decisions-making *in-bello* in the closing stages of the Vietnam and Iraq wars. If decision-making processes are a balancing act between the president's competing interests as both elected head of state and Commander-in-Chief, the American electoral cycle plays an important role in constraining military strategy in war. More specifically, presidents are often trapped by rhetorical commitments made in an earlier campaign trail, which may subside in the beginning of a term in office only to return with plans of re-election.

In the case of Trump, Hall argues, we find little direct linkage between foreign policy rhetoric during electoral campaigns and policymaking once the winning candidate takes office. Hall identifies a disconnect between Trump's foreign policy rhetoric on the campaign trail and his administration's counterterrorism policies. Two examples illustrate the distance between rhetoric and reality – the cases of the May 2017 Arab Islamic American Summit in Saudi Arabia, and the US role in the counter-ISIS campaign. They show that Trump's foreign policy rhetoric continued to deliver a crisis-focused message to the public rather than communicating and justifying the actual policy positions the administration took. Hall concludes that the main purpose of Trump's foreign policy rhetoric is the advancement of populist ideas. This moves his focus of interest away from terrorism as an area national security policy central to government, and towards Muslim immigrants and Washington elites as the actors behind the crisis of terrorism.

Elections may bring about discontinuity and disruption in the relationships the United States has with its long-standing allies. For example, eager to differentiate themselves from their predecessor, new presidents press for quick policy changes and decisions, thereby overturning previous policy (Fuchs, 2019; Mosher, 1985). Especially where electoral foreign policy rhetoric suggests drastic change rather than continuity, it may induce considerable uncertainty among international audiences (Wolford, 2007). Correspondingly, Blanc (2020) in this issue explores how the United States and the European Union have used institutionalised dialogues to help tame the anxiety related to a change of leadership, and in so doing reinforce their respective relationship identity. She finds that the potentially destabilising effects of elections are mitigated, in the case of Trump, by precisely the types of cooperative efforts that Trump railed against as candidate. Despite Trump's disdainful electoral rhetoric about the European Union, institutionalised transatlantic dialogue continues in the first months of the Trump's administration. This provided much-needed reassurance that the long-standing friendship was still relevant. Nevertheless, the quality and quantity of dialogues change at this time of transition – Trump's reliance on improvised and explosive ways of communication leads to more time being dedicated to clarifying presidential intentions. This allowed less focus on substantive issues of cooperation and foreign policy. By extension, a sense of urgency prompted several different state and non-state actors to further consolidate existing transatlantic ties and seek to forge new ones. Like other contributors to this special issue, then, Blanc sheds light on the mechanisms that govern the transmission belt between elections, foreign policy rhetoric, and actualised state behaviour.

Conclusion

Collectively, the contributions included in this special issue offer an initial attempt to tackle the conceptual and empirical intersection of elections, foreign policy rhetoric, and US foreign policy in times of Trump. By delving deeper into the causal and conceptual links between what is said and what is done during and after elections, we no longer treat foreign policy rhetoric as epiphenomenal. Rather, we view it as crucial to understanding the past and future direction of US foreign policy. Contributors to this special issue examine the significance of the 2016 election and of the first years of Trump's presidency, considering how they have changed and challenged the norms, style, and content of American foreign policy discourse. Ultimately, the shared goal is not only to unravel the conceptual and theoretical interplay of some of the core facets of state behaviour, but also to decipher where and how these insights can be applied to advance our understanding of

current American politics. This special issue takes a pluralist approach to methodology and analysis, encouraging the triangulation of different types of data and of different methods. At the same time, contributions in this special issue are joined by important conceptual and empirical similarities, motivated by their principal concern to understand the key drivers of Trump's ascendance, rhetoric, and impact on American politics and foreign policy.

Funding

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