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Project Overview

I found an amazing resource called the Miller Center, which had transcripts of public speeches made by US Presidents. I can't really tell what exactly their reasoning is for including some speeches, but not others, because it does seem like they are missing some, but overall it is an amazing resource and I was really excited about it. I was automatically drawn to an analysis of mentions of foreign nations because I am really interested in international affairs and I was reading a lot about how Trump approaches international affairs recently. I wanted to understand how different presidents approach foreign affairs situations in regards to their public statements. For example, do all presidents talk a lot about enemies in foreign wars? Do some mention allies more than they do enemies? What other organizations, such as NATO and the UN, are mentioned a lot and are there correlations with the political leanings of presidents? I hoped to create interesting visuals that in some way spoke to the character or style of different presidents and I wanted to track American foreign affairs through the words of our presidents.
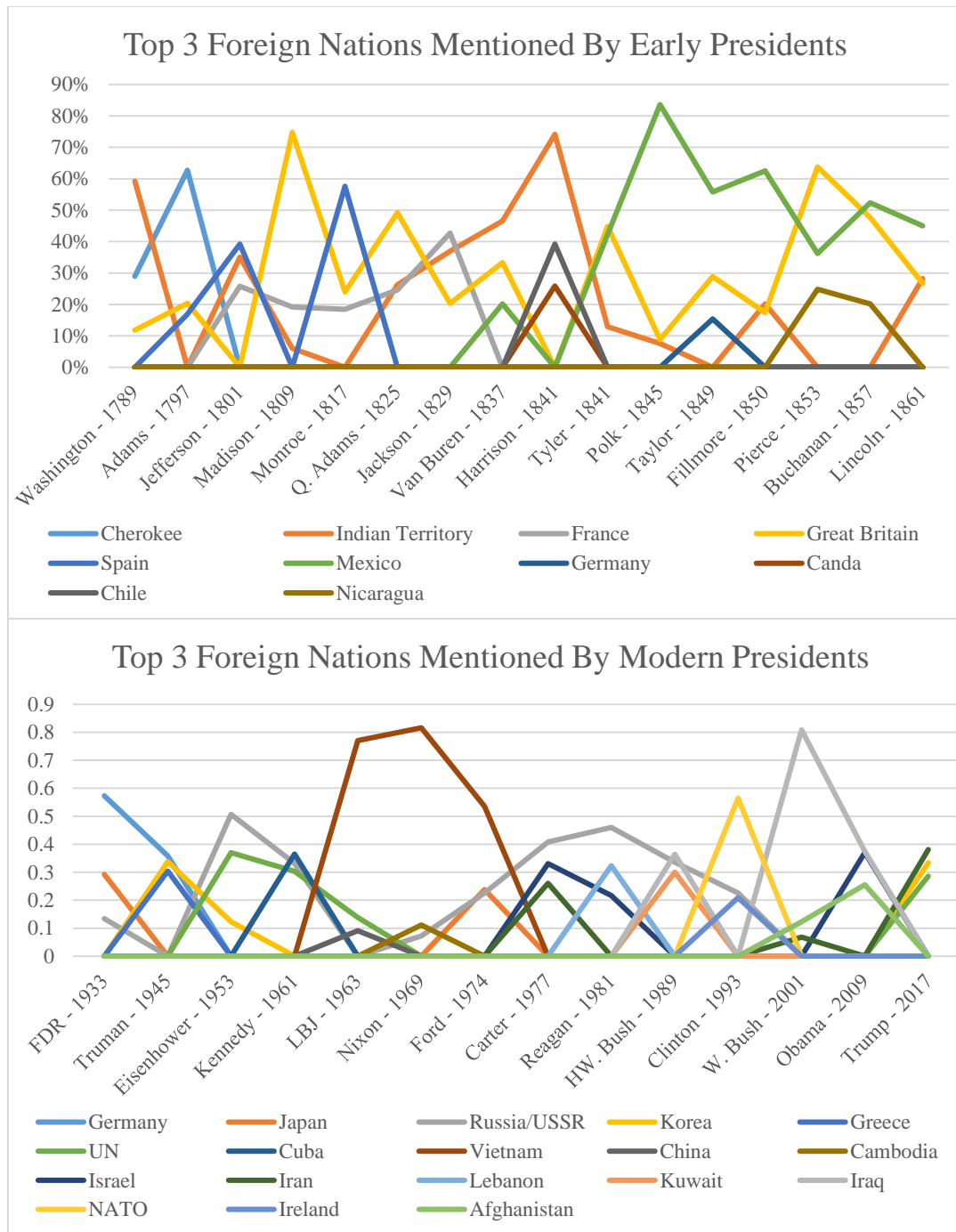
Implementation

First, I had to figure out a way to get all of the transcripts from the Miller Center website into text files. A Ninja and I thought we found a way to do that by iterating over the home site of the president speeches page, but the design of the page made it difficult. Links to the speeches for each president would pop up only after you clicked a filter, so links to all of the pages were never accessible through the page source of the home page. I did however figure out a way to get all the speeches of a president because of the "Next" button at the bottom of speech transcripts. I looked at the page source of each speech and found that there was a link to the next speech made by the president at the bottom. My code takes the first speech made by a president, copies the transcript, then gets the link for the next speech from the "Next" button. I then recursively run the program on the next speech for the number of speeches that a president has on the Miller Center website. All I had to do was count how many speeches each president had and the problem was solved. Not the prettiest way to do it, and it required some manual work of copying the url of the first speech and counting the speeches, but it worked.

The next part of the project was creating a dictionary with all of the terms that I wanted to look for. I used a dictionary because I wanted to have a key (the country) and a corresponding value (a count of the mentions of that country). I ended up using an imported package that had a list of all countries and "deleted countries," but truly editing all of those countries to what I wanted and then deleting small countries that I didn't think would provide much data was a huge hassle and it might have been better to just build my own dictionary.

Finally, my program counted the number of mentions of the foreign nations in the text files of each president. An important detail that I made sure to cover was the fact that foreign nations could be mentioned by their official name or as an adjective. For example, I believe that a president mentioning "British" holds the same weight as mentioning "Great Britain," so I also had to include adjective forms of many of the important nations. This wasn't necessary for nations that had the name in the adjective (like "Russia" is in "Russian"). I transferred that data to excel and made some visuals.

Results

Here are a few graphs that I made:

Top 3 Foreign Nations Mentioned By Early Presidents

Legend: Cherokee, Indian Territory, France, Great Britain, Spain, Mexico, Germany, Canda, Chile, Nicaragua

Top 3 Foreign Nations Mentioned By Modern Presidents

Legend: Germany, Japan, Russia/USSR, Korea, Greece, UN, Cuba, Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Israel, Iran, Lebanon, Kuwait, Iraq, NATO, Ireland, Afghanistan

I really liked seeing how the prevalence of different foreign nations rose and fall as they became more significant to US foreign policy. Most of these rises and falls have to do with wars, and the clearest correlations definitely correspond to wars. For example, "Vietnam" wasn't even in Kennedy's top 3 most mentioned foreign nations. This is probably due to the Cuban missile crisis occurring, but you still see how mentions of "Vietnam" rise and fall as the war ramps up and then ends.

I chose to show the top 3 mentions and then scale them based on percentage of top 3 mentions so that presidents that had more speeches or spoke more didn't have huge spikes. For example, LBJ was clearly a prolific speaker and had 600+ mentions of Vietnam. Nixon's 293 mentions are not 50% less significant than LBJ's because they actually make up a far larger percentage of the total mentions of Nixon's top 3 countries (Vietnam-293, Cambodia-40, USSR-26).

Some other things that I find interesting are how "cold" the Cold War really was. When taking into account how massive and long the Cold War was, it's odd that the Soviet Union wasn't a more significant part of many president's vernacular, but that makes sense because presidents sought to keep tensions low and show strength and character in other ways, such as through proxy wars or through goals in science and technology. For early presidents, the shift from a focus on "Indian Territories" or "Indians" to Latin American countries is particularly striking. This was a period of aggressive US expansion and when the US ran out of Native Americans to contend with, clearly, we moved on to Latin Americans. In addition, I was excited to see how Lincoln approached the Civil War and was surprised to find zero mentions of "Confederacy" or "Confederate States." Looking back, I remember that Lincoln never recognized the rebels as a true foreign power or referred to them by name. He made many mentions of "rebels," but none of "Confederates."

Alignment

How much alignment did you find between what you set out to explore and the data and tools used to carry out the project? What was set of questions you had that sparked your exploration, and what you imagined an answer might look like upon completion? To what degree did you feel that the data source(s) you selected could help you explore those questions given its limitations? How well did the tools that you employed, given their limitations, serve you during the analysis. How confident are you in the answers they provided.

There was a lot of alignment between what I set out to explore and what data/tools I used to carry out the project. I think that it really helped that I chose a data source that I was interested in and then figured out what analysis I wanted to run on that data. That really helped me think through exactly what information was going to be useful and what skills and tools I have at my disposal to make that happen.

My final results are very similar to what I thought my results were going to be. There is a very sharp correlation between US enemies and allies during war and mentions of those allies and enemies by US presidents in public speeches. This makes a lot of sense. There were a few things that I was surprised by, such as Lincoln's lack of mention of a "Confederacy." I think that the tools that I employed for this project worked really well. In particular, the ability to scan a page source and find a link to another speech let me walk through hundreds of speeches on the Miller Center website instead of manually entering links. That really helped a lot and I was proud that I build that process. Overall, I am very confident in the answers that I provided. There might be some things that I missed, but I think that I can determine the foreign policy focuses of public speeches of presidents.

Reflection

I was hoping to gain more insight into the stylistic choices of presidents in relation to foreign policy through this analysis, and I think that I have the data to do so. I could look at how long-winded presidents are when they speak of foreign nations or their sentimentality analysis around mentions of foreign nations. I also understand that this analysis doesn't necessarily show anything about the presidents personally. Many presidents have speech writers and their public

statements are meticulously planned and rehearsed. From a process standpoint, I think that I could have been more creative if I set out to answer some questions and then tried to find a source. My data may have limited the questions that I asked a little bit. Maybe books written by historians about presidents could have produced a more interesting result. Overall, I am really happy with this project, though, and I had a lot of fun!