Neue Zürcher Zeitung

Friend and enemy, viewed through the glasses of the White House

Each year, the President of the United States gives a speech on the state of the nation. A text analysis shows how the view of foreign countries has changed over the years and where Trump sets new records.

Marie-José Kolly / Andreas Rüesch / Anna Wiederkehr
31.1.2018, 13:32 clock

Die amerikanische Verfassung verpflichtet den Präsidenten, dem Kongress «von Zeit zu Zeit» Bericht über die Lage der Nation zu erstatten. Wie er dies tut und welche Prioritäten er darin setzt, ist ganz ihm überlassen. Eine Untersuchung der NZZ zu allen 231 überlieferten Ansprachen, von George Washingtons erster Rede im Jahr 1790 bis zu Donald Trumps Auftritt am Dienstagabend, zeigt zweierlei: Nicht nur hat sich der Blickwinkel auf die Aussenwelt in dieser Zeitspanne stark verschoben. Verlagert haben sich auch die Gewichte zwischen Innen- und Aussenpolitik.

Manchmal kein Wort über das Ausland

Dass ein amerikanischer Präsident in einer solchen feierlichen Rede sein eigenes Land häufiger als jedes andere nennt, liegt auf der Hand. Aber interessanterweise war dies in der Vergangenheit sehr unterschiedlich ausgeprägt. Es gab Jahre, in denen ein Präsident kein Wort über das Ausland verlor, und Ansprachen, in denen die Namen ausländischer Staaten häufiger erwähnt wurden als Amerika oder die Vereinigten Staaten.

Den stärksten Fokus auf das eigene Land setzte der heutige Präsident, Donald Trump, in seiner Ansprache vom vergangenen Jahr: Dort war die Dichte der Begriffe Amerika, Vereinigte Staaten oder USA am höchsten (siehe «Die Methodik im Detail» am Ende des Artikels). Unter allen anderen Staaten bedachte Trump in seinen beiden bisherigen Ansprachen Nordkorea mit sieben Nennungen am häufigsten. Es folgen China und Iran mit je vier und Kanada, Afghanistan und Israel mit je zwei Erwähnungen.

America First

Anzahl Erwähnungen in Donald Trumps Ansprachen an den Kongress
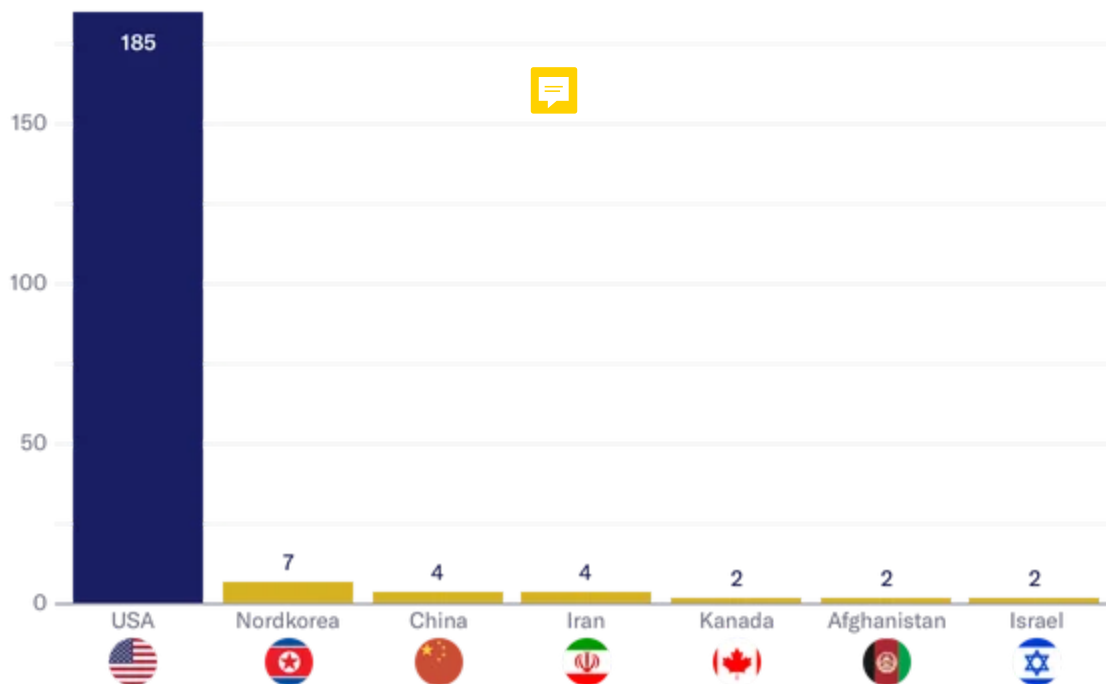
NZZ / awi., mjk.

Je einmal erwähnte Trump in seinen beiden bisherigen Ansprachen Australien, Belgien, Deutschland, Frankreich, den Irak, Kuba, Mexiko, Russland, Syrien und Venezuela.

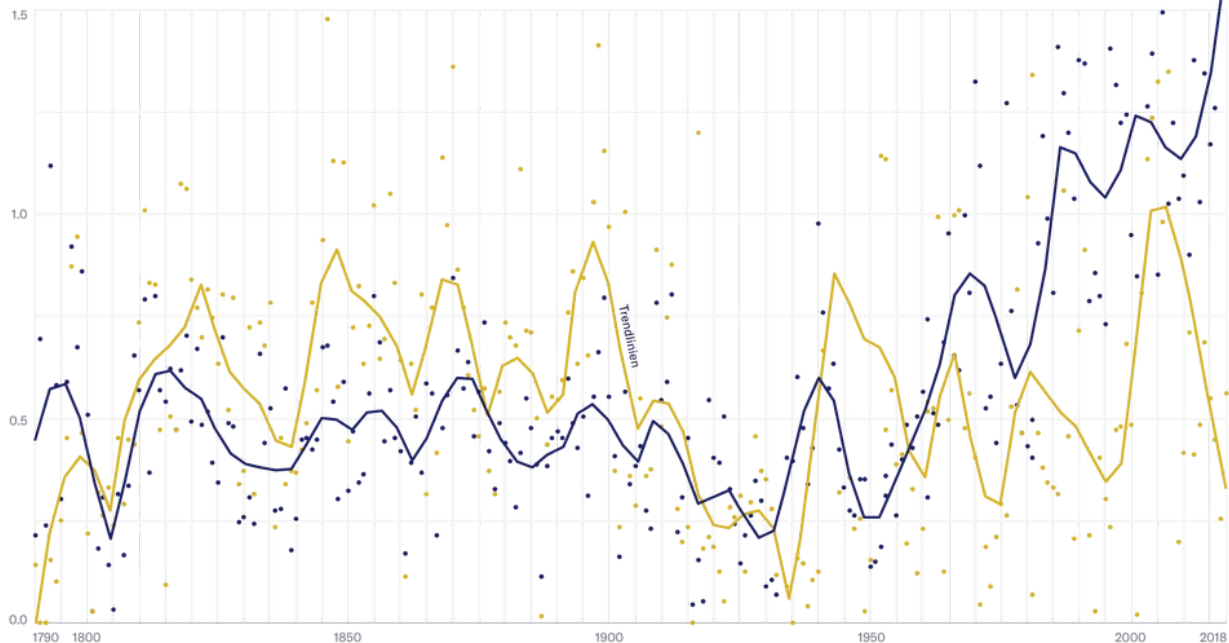Trump erwähnte In- und Ausland unter anderem in folgendem Kontext:

- «The United States is a compassionate nation.»

- «North Korea's reckless pursuit of nuclear missiles could very soon threaten our homeland.»

- «Around the world, we face rogue regimes, terrorist groups, and rivals like China and Russia that challenge our interests…»

- «When the people of Iran rose up against the crimes of their corrupt dictatorship, I did not stay silent.»

- «Chrysler is moving a major plant from Mexico to Michigan.»

Wie stark das Verhältnis zwischen Innen- und Aussensicht in den letzten 228 Jahren schwankte, zeigt folgende Grafik. Die Datenpunkte geben an, wie oft – gemessen am Gesamttext der jeweiligen Ansprache – die USA und ausländische Staaten und Regionen in den Reden zur Lage der Nation erwähnt wurden. Der besseren Übersicht halber sind zwei Trendlinien eingezeichnet, welche die Datenpunkte lokal durch Kurvenstücke approximieren (siehe «Die Methodik im Detail»). Es gab Jahre, in denen ein Präsident das Ausland mit keinem einzigen Wort bedachte. Das geschah mehrmals unter George Washington und letztmals unter Franklin Roosevelt 1935 während der Grossen Depression.

Nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg wird Amerika immer wichtiger

Anteil an allen Wörtern pro Rede, in Prozent

→• USA: «America[n]», «United States», «US[A]», «US», «our republic», «our / federal union»
→• Andere Länder und Regionen

Am stärksten geht Präsident Roosevelt kurz vor Ende des 2. Weltkriegs auf das Ausland ein. Im Fokus stehen Deutschland, Japan und Frankreich.

Die höchste «Dichte» der USA-Erwähnungen findet sich in Trumps Rede von 2017. Sie stellen 1,8 Prozent seiner Ansprache.

NZZ / awi., mjk.

Bereits ein flüchtiger Blick auf die Grafik offenbart einen Trend der letzten Jahrzehnte: Die Präsidentenreden beschäftigen sich seit den 1950er Jahren zunehmend mit Amerika als mit ausländischen Staaten. Der Rekord: In Trumps Rede vom Jahr 2017 bezieht sich durchschnittlich jedes 56. Wort auf die USA. Umgekehrt lassen die gelben Spitzen erkennen, in welchen Phasen die Aussenpolitik besonderes Augenmerk erhielt. In den letzten 120 Jahren war dies zur Zeit des Spanisch-Amerikanischen Krieges von 1898 der Fall, dann wieder ausgeprägt während des Zweiten Weltkriegs und in einzelnen Phasen des Kalten Krieges. Ihre Spuren hinterlassen haben auch die aussenpolitischen Herausforderungen zu Beginn der achtziger Jahre (Geiselkrise in Iran, sowjetischer Einmarsch in Afghanistan) und jene zu Beginn dieses Jahrtausends (Kriege in Afghanistan und im Irak).

But which countries have the American presidents in particular devoted themselves to in their speeches? If you expect the flashpoints in the Middle East or the strategic opponent Soviet Union / Russia to be at the forefront of American history, you will be surprised at the following chart. The most frequently mentioned, and with a great deal of distance, was the southern neighbor of Mexico in the 231 "State of the Union" texts examined.

The view abroad was most common to neighboring Mexico

Total number of mentions since 1790
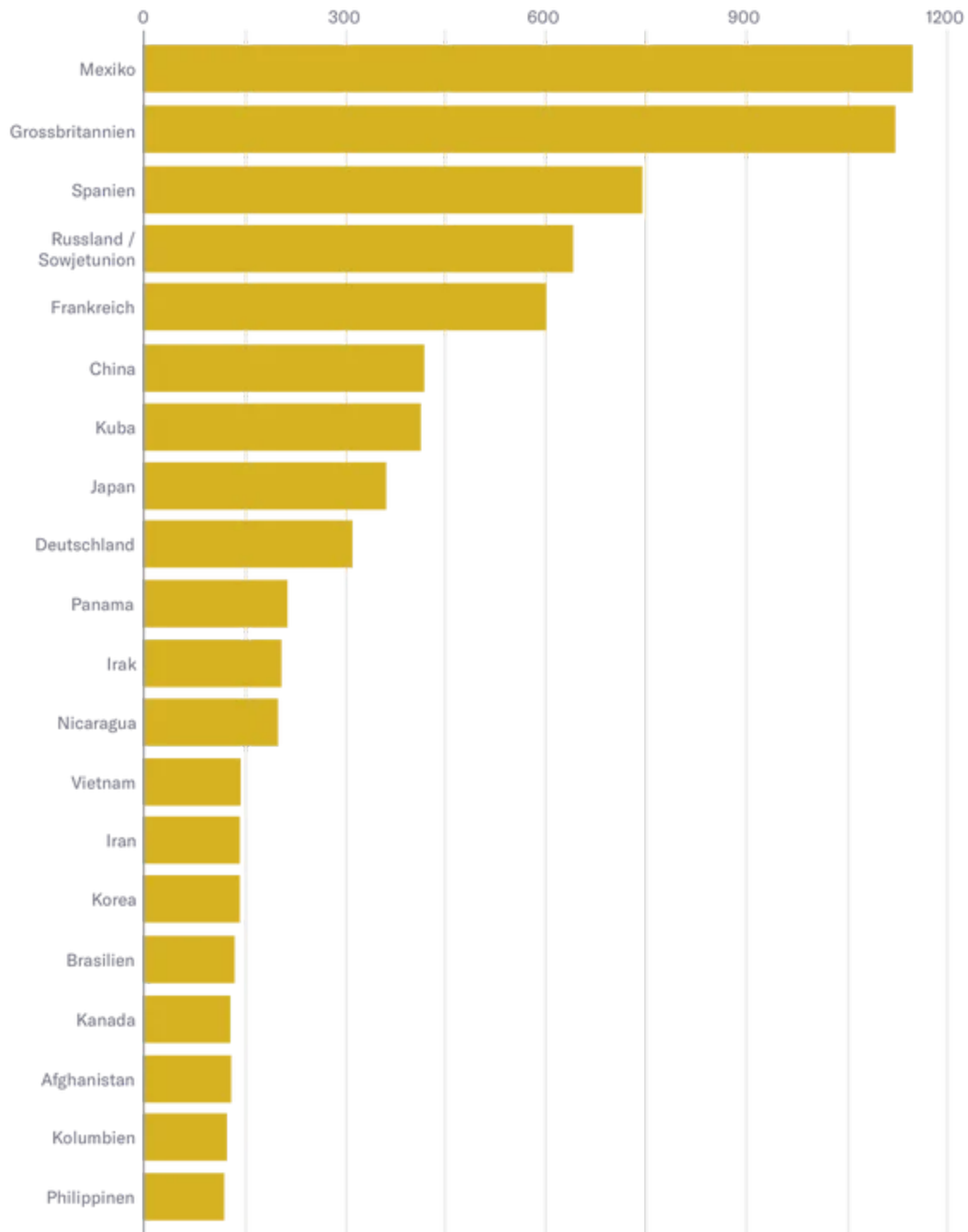
NZZ / awi., Mjk.

Next in line are the major European powers Great Britain, Spain, Russia / Soviet Union and France. Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan emerge in the field of the 20 most-cited countries only from the middle. As much as these three states are giving mind to today's American politicians, they were simply too insignificant for Washington until well into the second half of the twentieth century.

Perennial and individual cases

The extent to which the foreign policy "economy" fluctuated throughout American history is illustrated by the following graphs, whose typology is explained below.

Foreign policy fever curves - when which country was in focus

Share of all words per speech, in percent

NZZ / awi., Mjk.

Individual countries are to a certain extent perennial, others only appeared during brief historical episodes in speeches on the state of the nation.

Mexico – as the most mentioned country mentioned – was the dominant theme in the speeches of former Democratic President James Polk shortly before the middle of the 19th century. That's not surprising, because the Americans were at war against the neighboring country and wrested this a huge territory in today's southwestern United States. No longer as a war opponent, but as a country of origin of migrants and economic competitor Mexico is also mentioned in the present – most recently in Trump's speech of January 30, 2018.

Mexiko

Anteil an allen Wörtern pro Rede
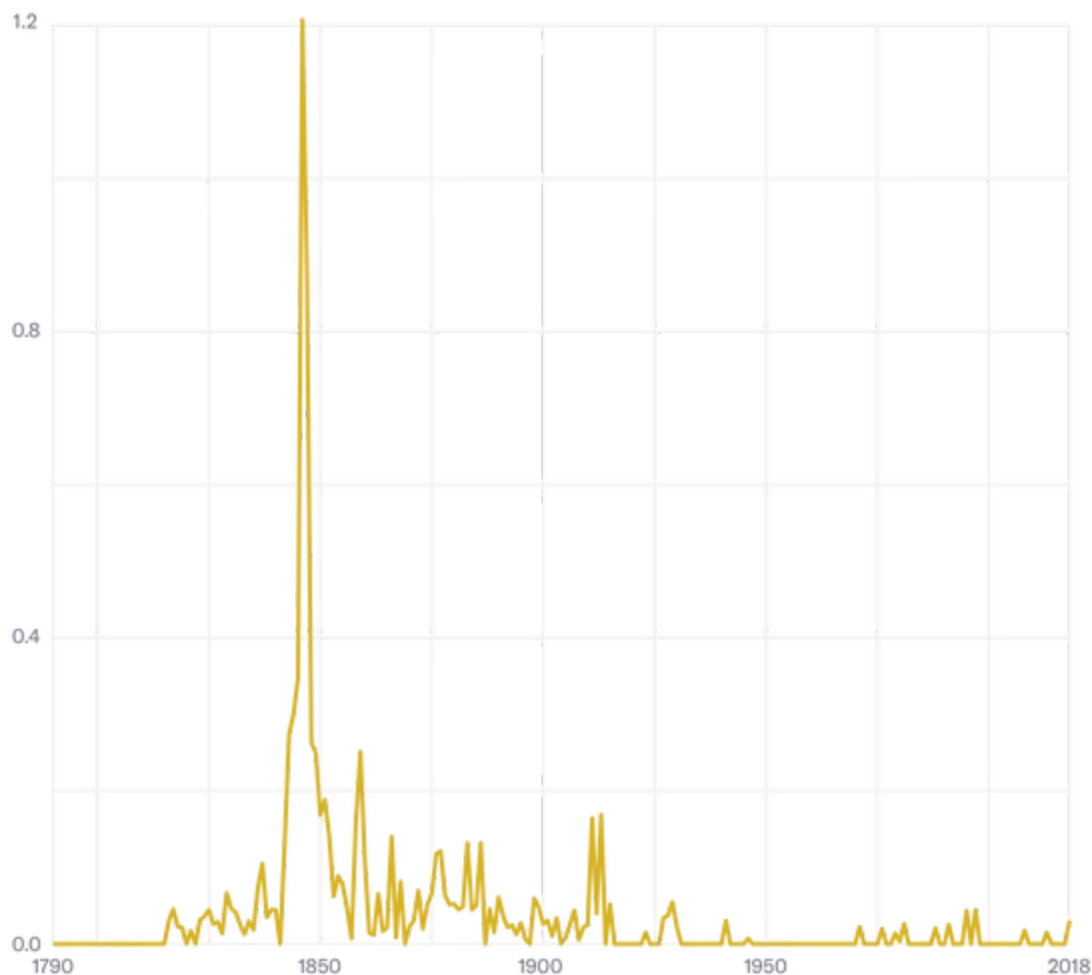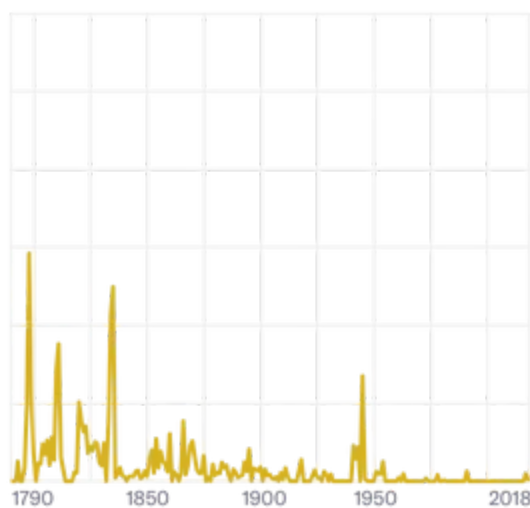

NZZ / awi., Mjk.

The loss of importance of the former European world powers Great Britain, France and Spain is also reflected in the speeches analyzed here. The former motherland of Great Britain, with which the Americans fought two victim-rich wars at the beginning of their history, is the most widely mentioned at this stage. The fact that France and Spain both actively supported American independence is, understandably, also expressed in the speeches. Spain, from which the United States snatched important parts of its colonial empire in 1898, including Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico, was barely ever in the Americans' focus, while the British and French allies began to speak more frequently during the Second World War.
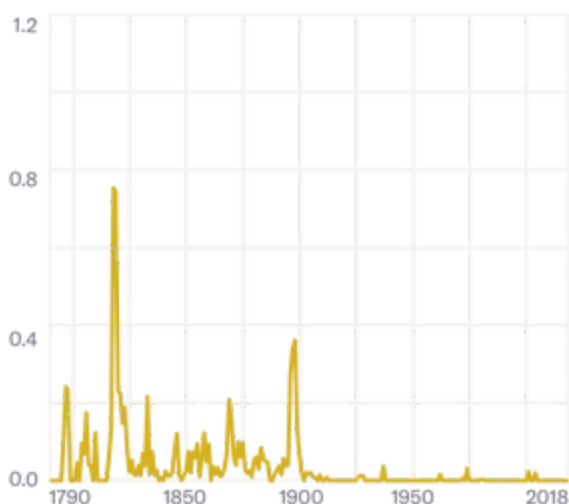
Grossbritannien
Anteil an allen Wörtern pro Rede
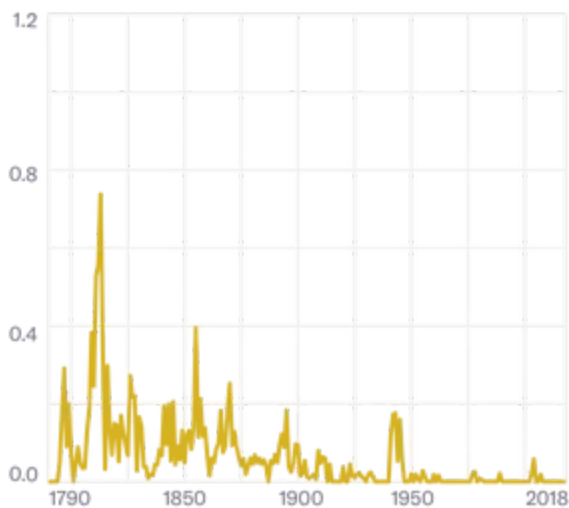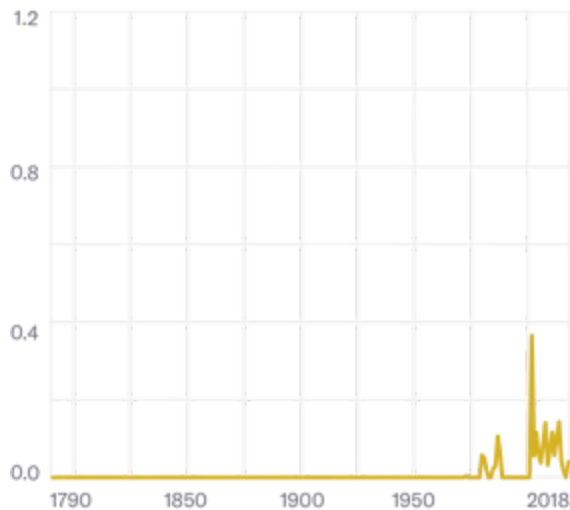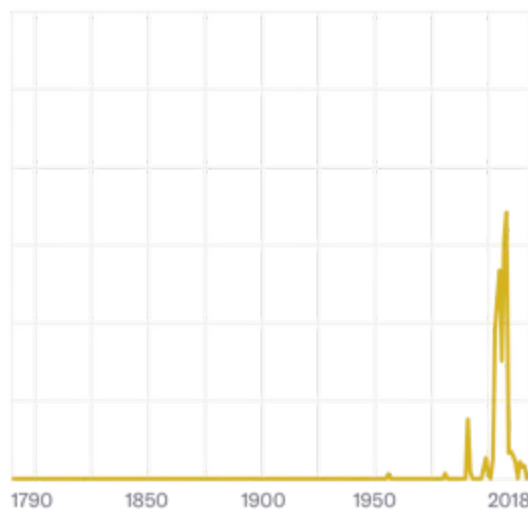
Frankreich

Spanien

NZZ / awi, mjk.

Conversely, Iraq and Afghanistan are mentioned for the first time in the late 20th century – and then especially intensively at the time of the US military interventions in the two countries under President George W. Bush.

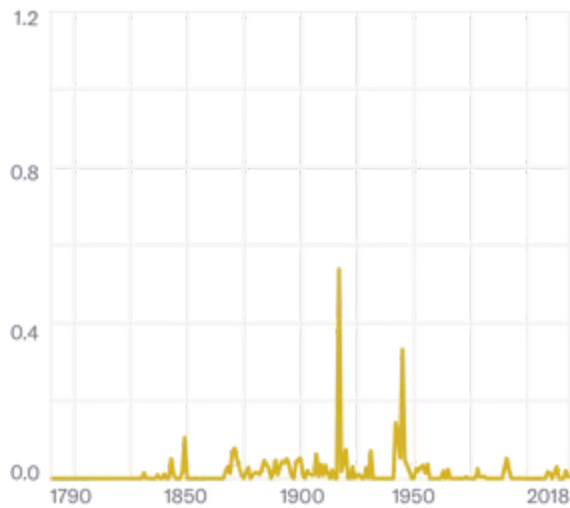## Afghanistan

Anteil an allen Wörtern pro Rede
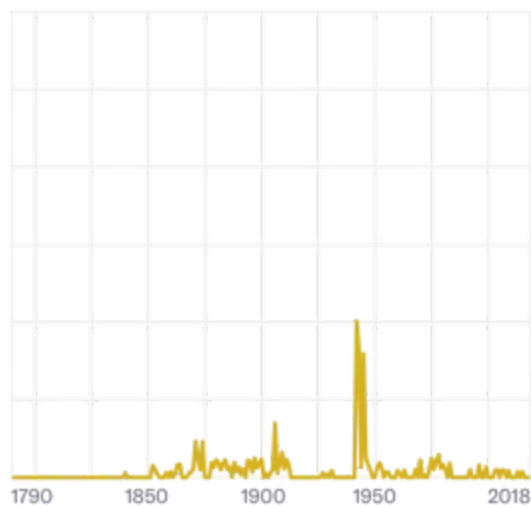
Irak

NZZ / awi, mjk.

That Germany and Japan were at times among the core topics of the presidential speeches, also not surprising. The graph below shows two highlights in the case of Germany and one in the case of Japan – it is the time of the First or the Second World War.

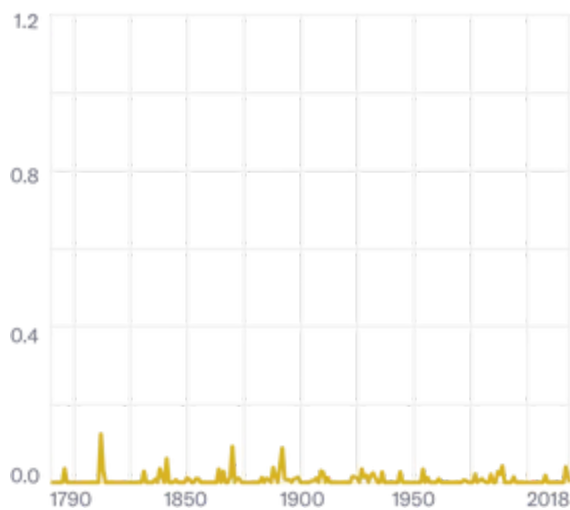## Deutschland

Anteil an allen Wörtern pro Rede

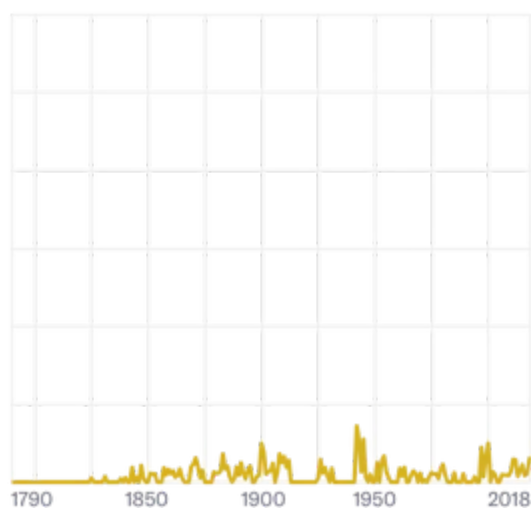
Japan

NZZ / awi, mjk.

Other countries, on the other hand, regularly appear in the speeches, but never as dominant themes. Examples are Canada and China.

Kanada

Anteil an allen Wörtern pro Rede

China

NZZ / awi, mjk.

Like a seismogram of American history, the graphs also illustrate the sharp
political upheavals that occasionally caused some relatively small
countries in the US. An example of this is Cuba, which was reflected in
speeches by American presidents around 1900 after the occupation by the
US, then again after the revolution led by Fidel Castro, and regularly in
recent years. A particularly pronounced rash is recorded in Vietnam: The
frequent mention of this country in the years around 1970 illustrates an
American trauma – the loss-making and ultimately lost war in Indochina.

Kuba   ## Vietnam

Anteil an allen Wörtern pro Rede
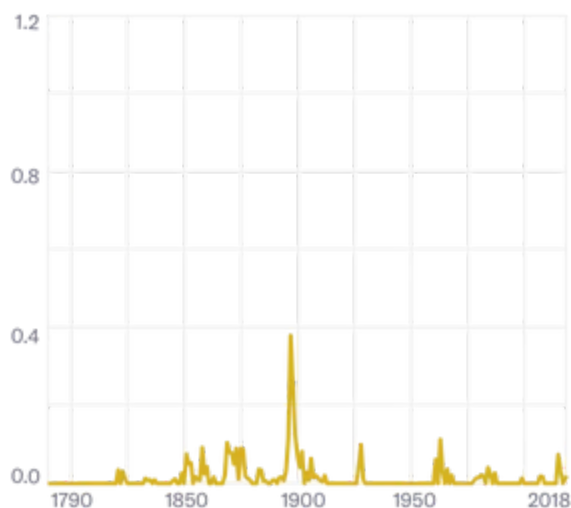
NZZ / awi, mjk.

The methodology in detail

Choice of Texts

The textual analysis database includes 231 American President speeches: all State of the Union speeches and speeches given by the five recent Presidents to Congress shortly after their inauguration. The latter are technically not State of the Union, but due to their similarity to this type of text they nevertheless flowed into the present text collection. Only from the year 1933 there is no speech.

Most of these speeches were taken from a text collection of the «Sotu» library in the programming language «R»taken. This collection contains several duplicates, for example when there is an address by a specific President both verbally and in writing. Of these, the longer speech was accepted for the NZZ text collection. Exceptions, as far as the source is concerned, are the two speeches by Donald Trump from the website of the White House . From these two speeches occurrences of "(Applause.)", "(Laughter.)" Or "(Laughter and applause.)" Were removed. Another exception - as far as the form of the address is concerned - is Richard Nixon's 1973 address: He delivered his speech in several parts, all of which were included in the text collection.

text analysis

To find out how often the US is mentioned, the text collection was searched for the following nouns and adjectives: "America"; "American"; «United States»; "UNITED STATES"; «US» (capitalization only); "Our republic"; "Our union"; "Federal union".

For references from other countries, the "Regex" vector with English-language country names from the "Country Code" library in the "R" programming language has been adapted and supplemented for the present needs, and the text collection has been supplemented by nouns and adjectives that refer to countries and territories outside USA. Unless otherwise stated, in this article, numbers in Korea refer to the total number of entries, which includes North and South Korea.

For mentions of larger regions or continents, the vector was adapted and supplemented with English-language region names of the same "Country Code" library .

The terms were counted per year and possibly summed up into groups. Then, the proportion of each group was calculated on the total number of words of each speech. Thus, the density of the mention of a term in a speech results - regardless of the length of the speech, which varies greatly over the years. The only exception is the first graphic to Trump: Here, the absolute number of mentions was presented, regardless of the length of his speeches.

Trend line calculation

The trend lines are based on the Loess method:a non-parametric regression method that fits curve pieces locally to the data points.

Code

The code for the text analysis is available on Github .

More about the State of the Union response:

Trump gives the unifier

In his first State of the Union address, President Trump rhetorically cornered the Democrats. Given the progress he has made, it may be difficult for them to refuse cooperation.

Beat Ammann, Washington / 31.1.2018, 05:53

COMMENT

The role of the bridge builder fits badly with Trump

With his State of the Union address, Donald Trump has failed to give a credible turn to his flagging presidency. Despite conciliatory rhetoric, he continues to polarize.

Andreas Rüesch / 31.1.2018, 10:03

EXPLAINED

Zehn Wahlversprechen von Trump in der Zwischenbilanz

Vor einem Jahr zog Donald Trump ins Weisse Haus ein und machte den Amerikanern vollmundige Versprechungen. Welche hat er ein Jahr später eingelöst?

Marie-Astrid Langer / Andreas Rüesch / Martin Lanz / David Bauer / 18.1.2018, 10:00