



When Public Statements Reveal Private Beliefs: Assessing Operational Codes at a Distance

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This article uses both public and private documents to measure the operational code of John F. Kennedy in the summer of 1962. Previous operational code research (and indeed, much of content analysis more generally) has relied exclusively on the analysis of public speeches and is thus open to charges that the speeches represent attempts at deception, persuasion, or impression management. This article tests the validity of using public speech data in operational code analysis by comparing the output to the results one gets by analyzing private statements from the same period. The results strongly indicate that one obtains the same results using either the public or the private data, thus providing tentative confirmation of the validity of using public speeches for assessing the operational codes of leaders.

KEY WORDS: Operational Code, Assessment at a distance, John F. Kennedy

The assessment of leaders in political science has traditionally relied upon several methods. Psychobiography (e.g., George & George, 1956) has tended to use archival documents, memoirs, and interviews in combination with concepts borrowed from psychoanalytic theory. Others, such as Woodward (2003), have relied primarily on interviewing the subject to gain insight into their beliefs, motives, and ultimately, their decisions. So-called “assessment at a distance”¹ has taken as its fundamental assumption the idea that useful (and revealing) information about political leaders can be gleaned from public speeches, if only one knows where, and how, to look. Within this epistemological umbrella are analyses of leaders’ conceptual and integrative complexity (e.g., Suedfeld & Tetlock, 1977; Thoemmes & Conway, 2007), cognitive maps (Axelrod, 1976), traits (Hermann, 2005), and the subject of this article: operational codes.

¹ For an overview of assessment at a distance, see Winter (2005).

Operational codes are philosophical and instrumental beliefs about the nature and use of power in the international system and allow us to gain important insights into the basis on which important decisions are made. The focus of this article is on the validity of the methods used for operational code analysis.² Specifically, the issue addressed here is whether public speeches give an accurate portrait of a leader's operational code. The operational code research program has long relied on public speeches to infer beliefs (the empirical, theoretical, and practical reasons for doing so will be examined in this article), yet the validity of this approach has not been properly evaluated. The relevant question for this research is this: Do leaders' public speeches convey their actual beliefs?

This article tests this question by constructing two operational codes for President John F. Kennedy during the summer of 1962. The first analysis infers the operational code from public speeches he made during that time period, while the second utilizes newly released transcripts from the tape recorder President Kennedy began using that summer to record his private discussions with his inner circle of advisors. The findings indicate a surprising degree of similarity between the two operational codes, allowing us comparatively more confidence in the use of public speeches to infer various aspects of a leader's belief system.

The Operational Code: An Overview

The concept of the "operational code" has a long history in the social sciences. The term was first coined by Nathan Leites in his two now classic works—*The Operational Code of the Politburo* (1951) and *A Study of Bolshevism* (1953). Leites conceptualized the responses of the Politburo to political decisions as a series of decision-making "rules" and axioms that constituted their worldview. He then drew upon psychoanalytic theory and social psychology to account for this worldview and analyze the primary motivations and goals of Soviet leaders.

The operational code concept languished for a decade and a half, until Alexander George resurrected it in his seminal article, "The 'Operational Code': A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making" (1969). Noting that Leites' original work was "unusually complex," George sought to extract the key feature of interest to political scientists—the operational code itself—from the "social-psychological account of the historical origins and meanings of Bolshevism" (1969, p. 193). George's goal in separating the operational code from Leites' "psychoanalytic hypotheses" was to make it more amenable to investigation using the type of methods and data that are generally available to political scientists (p. 195).

² This article sets aside the critical, related, issue of the link between psychology and behavior. That is, do operational codes add to our ability to either predict or explain consequential decisions of leaders or states in the international system? For examples of recent research linking operational codes to leadership behavior, see Walker, Schafer, and Young (1999); Feng (2005); and Schafer and Walker (2006b).

The operational code does not encompass all the beliefs that influence the behavior of a given individual. And though the term itself perhaps conjures up a set of routine procedures or rules to apply mechanistically to political life, it is instead a subset of political beliefs that are especially relevant in the context of political decision making. George divided these beliefs up into *philosophical* beliefs (general assumptions regarding the fundamental nature of politics, conflict, and the individual) and *instrumental* beliefs (more specific beliefs concerning the methods leaders should employ in attaining the ends they desire). An individual's operational code is comprised of their answers to the following questions:

Philosophical

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 political opponents?

P-2: What are the prospects for the eventual realization of one's fundamental political values and aspirations? Can one be optimistic, or must one be pessimistic on this score, and in what respects the one and/or the other?

P-3: Is the political future predictable? In what sense and to what extent?

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?

P-5: What is the role of "chance" in human affairs and in historical development?

Instrumental

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

I-2: How are the goals of action pursued most effectively?

I-3: How are the risks of political action calculated, controlled, and accepted?

I-4: What is the best "timing" of action to advance one's interest?

I-5: What is the utility and role of different means for advancing one's interests?

George's article spurred a large number of works that used the operational code construct to analyze individual decision makers (e.g., Holsti, 1970; McLellan, 1971; Tweraser, 1974; Walker, 1977). Further work attempted to identify the "causal nexus" between operational codes and the foreign policy behaviors of leaders (George, 1979), as well as to establish a set of rules and procedures for inferring the operational codes of leaders (Holsti, 1977).

"Assessment at a Distance"

Because scholars rarely have the access to leaders that would allow for direct interviewing or psychological analysis, they naturally rely on written and spoken

communications. These might include: memoirs, transcripts of private meetings, public speeches, news conferences, and media interview transcripts. The reliance on such data raises a host of methodological questions (for an excellent review of these issues, see Schafer, 2000), the most central of which is this: To what extent do leaders' public speeches reflect their true beliefs?

There have been two primary rationales for using public speeches for operational code analysis (and content analysis more generally), one theoretical, the other practical. The theoretical assumption behind operational code analysis is that "a leader's public behavior is constrained by his public image and that, over time, his public actions will consistently match his public beliefs" (Walker et al., 2003, p. 223). In other words, the speech of leaders (almost always) contains information that is indicative of their true beliefs. The numerous studies that have analyzed the operational codes of political leaders have almost universally taken this assumption to be correct and used either public statements by the leader in office or books and essays published by the leader before taking office.

Empirically, there is also evidence suggesting that public speech can betray some types of information that leaders might consciously try to suppress. For instance, there is evidence that the integrative complexity of leaders (which tends to decline in the lead-up to wars) also declines prior to surprise attacks, unknowingly giving clues to the impending attack to those who know where (and how) to look (Suedfeld & Bluck, 1988).

The second rationale for the use of public documents and speeches in operational code analysis is more practical. For most leaders, the public record is far more extensive than the private. Additionally, we often have to wait years, or decades, for private material to become available. The *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, for instance, waits roughly 30 years before declassifying and publishing its documents, and we very rarely have access to leaders' secretly taped conversations such as are utilized in this article. Finally, many previous operational code studies have been focused on contemporaneous political elites, which effectively restricts the available data to public speeches or interviews.

The most severe problem presented by the use of public materials for psychological assessment is the problem of "impression management." That is, if spoken words are intended for a strategic purpose (e.g., to persuade or to create a desired impression on others), they may not be as useful for assessing what Tetlock and Manstead (1984) termed "intrapyschic" characteristics of individuals. If this thesis is true, it poses serious challenges to the operational code analysis research program and more generally to content analysis of leaders' public speech.

In order to test the usefulness of using public speech to infer beliefs, one might compare results generated from public and private speech. In order to have confidence in our inferences, however, we must eliminate potentially confounding elements by restricting the speech used to (a) the same person and (b) the same time frame. We must add to that that the time frame must be free of any obviously

confounding characteristics which might tend to create a larger than normal divergence between public and private speech.

To date, there have been (to this author's knowledge) two attempts to empirically validate the use of public statements, neither of which has met the conditions outlined above. The first, which examined Lyndon Johnson and his advisors, does not address the specific concerns of this study. In it, Walker and Schafer (2000) examined the public statements of President Johnson (which they hypothesized as representative of the operational code of the state) and compared those to the private statements of *his advisors*. In fact, this study illustrates the difficulty in collecting suitable data to analyze private statements, as the authors noted that (even more than three decades later) they were not able to find sufficient private statements of President Johnson's to compare to his public statements (pp. 532–533). Primarily, though, this study fails to validate the use of public speech because of the asymmetric comparison between the public speech of the President and the private speech of Presidential advisors.³

The second attempt to address the issue of public versus private statements took advantage of what must be one of the best-documented crises in history—the Cuban Missile Crisis—to compare the public rhetoric of President Kennedy to private statements made during Ex-Comm meetings (Marfleet, 2000). Marfleet found significant differences between the president's public and private rhetoric, as well as differences between the different phases of the crisis. However, he also found suggestive evidence that the trends for most VICS indices were in the same general direction (though of different magnitudes) for the public and the private statements (Marfleet, 2000, pp. 551–557). On its face, the Marfleet study would seem to prescribe caution to those who would use public speeches to infer the belief systems of leaders.

However, there are two reasons to believe that this study might not provide definitive evidence on whether public statements are useful for assessing operational codes.

The first reason is that Marfleet's analysis focused on a crisis period. While it is entirely reasonable to argue for a change in operational codes over time, the danger with analyzing statements for change in such a condensed, emotionally charged time frame is that the results may not reflect changes in beliefs about the nature of politics, but rather affective reactions to developments during the crisis. For instance, Marfleet found notable "belligerence" in Kennedy's beliefs in both the predecision and decision phases of the crisis, which only diminished after the resolution of the crisis. While this may indicate a more conflictual operational code, it may also reflect Kennedy's emotional reaction to uncovering the fact of Khrushchev's deception (see Rosen, 2005, p. 63).

³ Walker and Schafer's purpose in their article was not necessarily to test the validity of the use of public speech in operational code analysis, though they do appear to have been interested in the relationship between private and public speech (2000, p. 530).

The second reason that Marfleet's analysis may not be definitive is that the fundamental assumption of operational code analysis—that the speech of political actors will converge with their real beliefs—is highly questionable during crisis situations. Recall that the assumption permits the divergence of speech and beliefs in some circumstances, only asserting that the two will *tend* to converge. However, crisis situations present a challenge to this assumption. On one hand, leaders engaged in a crisis that they hope to resolve peacefully have an incentive to signal this desire to their adversaries in order to avoid war. Yet, they also have to consider potential “audience costs” (Fearon, 1994; see Zelikow, Naftali, & May, 2001b, p. 197 for President Kennedy's discussion of his own “audience costs”) that might accrue from backing down, and might also have incentives to exaggerate their resolve to their adversary. In the particular case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, for instance, there is evidence that Kennedy used “combative rhetoric” in public, while secretly planning a compromise in private (Guttieri, Wallace, & Suedfeld, 1995, p. 607). In fact, it is precisely during crisis situations when we would expect to find greater divergence between public and private speech.

A Comparison of Public versus Private Statements

Methodology

For this analysis, the program *Profiler Plus v. 5.7.0* was used, along with the “Operational Code” scheme, which utilized the Verbs In Context System (VICS). Both were provided by Social Science Automation, Inc. A full explanation of the VICS is outside of the scope of this article, but a brief overview will be useful.⁴

The core of operational code analysis lies in inferring a leader's beliefs about power in relationships (e.g., When should it be used? In what circumstances is it useful or necessary? etc.). As a result, VICS focuses on verbs in speech acts of those individuals that are the subject of analysis. One can conceptualize VICS as working in two separate stages. In the first stage, “utterances” (sentences that contain verbs) are coded for directionality (+ for cooperative or – for conflictual) and then for intensity (as either *words* or *deeds*)⁵. Intensity is scaled from –3 (Punish) to +3 (Reward).⁶

The second stage of the VICS coding is the attribution of the verbs. Utterances in which the subject refers to himself (or an ingroup) represent his/her beliefs with respect to the exercise of power, or in other words, his instrumental beliefs. Utterances that refer to an “other” represent beliefs about how others exercise power

⁴ For a full overview, see Walker, Schafer, and Young (1998) and Schafer and Walker (2006a).

⁵ *Deeds* indicate the exercise of power in a relationship as in “The United States is attacking China.” *Words* represent the promises or threats to use power, or the support of or opposition to an “other.” In the sentence “the United States condemns China,” the word “condemns” is a *word* (Schafer & Walker, 2006a, p. 31), while “attacking” would be coded as a *deed*.

⁶ The full scale is as follows: Punish (–3), Threaten (–2), Oppose (–1), Neutral (0), Support (+1), Promise (+2), and Reward (+3).

in the international system and are indicative of the subject's philosophical beliefs (Schafer & Walker, 2006a, p. 32). The guide to VICS' numerical scores is contained in Appendix A. To briefly illustrate the coding system, consider the following sample sentence: "Russian military forces have invaded India." The *subject* of this sentence is "Russian military forces," which would be coded as referring to an "other." The verb phrase "have invaded" is in the past tense, and the directionality is negative and high in intensity. Thus, this verb phrase would be coded as "punish" (-3).

Content

The content utilized for analysis was as follows. The unit of analysis for this article was the public and private context. The "public speech" operational code was aggregated from six separate speech acts of President Kennedy between June 1 and September 1, 1962; four were speeches or remarks to groups, and two were the opening statements of a news conference (though the analysis included only the prepared remarks in these cases, not the President's answers to reporters' questions⁷). All speeches focused primarily on foreign policy issues.⁸

The content analyzed for President Kennedy's "private" operational code was culled from Zelikow, Naftali, and May (2001a), which contained transcripts of recorded meetings that took place between Kennedy and his advisors. The material used was taken from four separate meetings during the June 1–September 1 timeframe, and all were focused primarily on foreign policy issues (e.g., Berlin, Laos, arms control). The public and private speeches aggregated to 153 and 110 codeable verbs, respectively, allowing us a measure of confidence in the VICS indices.⁹

⁷ Previous research has demonstrated that slightly different results are produced by analyzing spontaneous versus planned remarks (Dille, 2000). Using only the planned/opening remarks of Presidents during press conferences follows the precedent set by Walker and Schafer (2000).

⁸ All material analyzed was primarily on the subject of foreign policy. The reason for this is that previous research has demonstrated that operational codes may be domain-specific (Walker et al., 2003: 221).

⁹ The first standard for operational code analysis was 1,500 words as a minimum length for each speech act used. This was used so that the mean score for the combined speeches would not be disproportionately influenced by very short speeches. More recent efforts have pre-aggregated the speeches into one "big speech," as was done in this analysis, and as such are not so concerned about individual speech length as long as each speech act contains between 10–15 verbs that can be coded in VICS. 10–15 codeable verbs is the threshold below which the smaller speeches are likely to be too case-sensitive to be of value in constructing a valid operational code (Schafer & Walker, 2006a, pp. 43–44). The methodological issue of how one should compile content data for operational code analysis reflects an important substantive issue. The operational code construct can be conceptualized as either a stable "personality trait" or a "state of mind" (analogous to the distinction between "conceptual complexity" (trait) and "integrative complexity" (state)). If it is conceptualized as a stable personality trait, it is defensible to aggregate many smaller speech acts for purposes of analysis, since there should not be significant shifts in the operational code over time. If, however, the operational code is conceptualized as a state of mind, then one would expect to see important shifts depending on the context of the speech act. This conceptual difference however, does not impact the results presented below, which indicate only miniscule difference in both the aggregate *and* the mean VICS scores.

Results

The results from the operational code analysis are presented in Table 1. Several notable trends emerge from this analysis. The most obvious and dramatic result is the striking similarity between the public and private operational code of President Kennedy. For the VICS indices which can be either “+” or “-” (P-1, P-2, I-1, I-2) *there was not a single change in directionality of beliefs*. President Kennedy’s belief in the friendly nature of the political universe, his optimism in contemplating the realization of his political values, his cooperative strategic and

Table 1. John F. Kennedy’s Operational Code: Public v. Private

	Public	Private
P-1 Nature of the Political Universe	+38 (definitely friendly)	+43 (definitely friendly)
P-2 Realization of Political Values	+22 (somewhat optimistic)	+15 (somewhat optimistic)
P-3 Predictability of Political Future	+07 (very low)	+21 (low)
P-4 Control Over Historical Development	.15 (low)	.32 (low)
P-5 Role of Chance	.99 (very high)	.97 (very high)
I-1 Strategic Approach to Goals	+57 (definitely cooperative)	+65 (very cooperative)
I-2 Tactical Pursuit of Goals	+23 (somewhat cooperative)	+33 (somewhat cooperative)
I-3 Risk Orientation	.30 (low)	.27 (low)
I-4 Timing of Action		
a. Cooperation/Conflict	.43 (medium)	.46 (medium)
b. Words/Deeds	.43 (medium)	.44 (medium)
I-5 Utility of Means		
a. Reward	.13 (medium)	.18 (medium)
b. Promise	.04 (very low)	.07 (low)
c. Appeal/Support	.61 (very high)	.58 (very high)
d. Oppose/Resist	.13 (medium)	.12 (low/medium)
e. Threaten	0 (very low)	.02 (very low)
f. Punish	.09 (low)	.04 (very low/low)

tactical approaches to achieving his goals, all remained relatively unchanged in his private speech.

In fact, the VICS scale (Appendix A) shows that the magnitude of the largest single changes were one verbal category, e.g., from “low” to “medium.”¹⁰ These changes of one descriptive category occurred in P-3, I-1, and I-5 (promise). Even these changes were of relatively low magnitude: .14, .08, and .03, respectively. Besides these changes, scores of two questions changed by half of a descriptive category (e.g., from “low” to “low/medium”). Both of these changes occurred in I-5 (oppose/resist and punish) and the magnitude of the changes was .03 and .05, respectively. The scores for nine questions remained in the exact same category, generally with only very small changes in magnitude.

In addition to the aggregate scores presented in Table 1, mean scores were calculated in the private ($n = 4$) and public ($n = 6$) contexts for each of the VICS indices.¹¹ A two-tailed Student’s *t*-Test was applied to determine the statistical significance in the difference in means for each of the indices. In none of the indices did the difference in means reach significance at $p < .05$. Only one of the indices, P3, was significant at $p < .10$, and that difference was still of a very small magnitude.

In sum, both the public and private documents paint a very similar picture of President Kennedy. They indicate a leader who is optimistic about both the nature of the political universe and his own prospects for realizing his goals (P-1, P-2); who has very low confidence in the predictability of events and his own control over those events (P-3, P-4); who believes cooperation to be the best overall strategy (I-1) and tactic (I-2) in the “somewhat” friendly political universe; who has a low tolerance for risk (I-3) and a medium level of flexibility in shifting between cooperation and conflict (I-4a) and between words and deeds (I-4b).

Finally, JFK’s uses of power index (I-5) shows the same rank order of propensities in public and private: appeal/support > reward = or > oppose/resist > punishments > threats. While this operational code is certainly more optimistic and cooperative in nature than that found by Marfleet (2000, p. 551), this is to be expected. The analysis done here establishes a “baseline” operational code for President Kennedy’s short term in office, prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis, which Marfleet showed to have significant short-term effects (and likely longer-lasting ones as well) on Kennedy’s beliefs.

¹⁰ The verbal descriptors used in Table 1 (and described in full in Appendix A) have not generally been applied in the past to raw VICS scores coded by computers. However, the primary goal of this article is not to analyze the likely behavior of John F. Kennedy during the summer of 1962, but rather to examine how far apart the VICS scores in one context (private) are from those in the other context (public). The verbal descriptors are just one more way—in addition to the raw scores and the ANOVA tests—to conceptualize this difference.

¹¹ All speech acts met the minimum requirement of 10–15 codeable verbs.

Conclusion

The use of public statements for the purposes of interpretation and analysis by political scientists is both commonplace and fraught with potential hazards. Public speech may have many purposes besides conveying the preferences and beliefs of the speaker. It is often used to persuade, to manage an audience's impression, or even to deceive. In addition, some speeches (such as those written by new speechwriters) may be less reflective of the beliefs, ideas, or preferences of the leader than others.

Yet, the striking result of the analysis presented in this article is that the operational code of John F. Kennedy—as determined by VICS—was remarkably similar in the public and the private contexts. These results provide some empirical confirmation of the validity of utilizing public speech to analyze the operational codes of leaders. Furthermore, the research design utilized in this article constituted a relatively difficult test for operational code analysis. Not only was the source material from different domains, but the public material was prepared speech while the private material was spontaneous.¹² While care should certainly be taken in generalizing from these results, they are at least suggestive of the validity of using public speech for content analysis.

And while future research might focus on the particular instances when this finding may not hold (such as in crises, or during times of war), scholars can now proceed with the operational code research program with a greater degree of confidence.

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¹² Recall that Dille (2000) found that spontaneous and prepared speech generated slightly different results in the cases of Presidents Reagan and Bush (Sr.).

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APPENDIX A

P-1: Nature of the Political Universe

HOSTILE								FRIENDLY	
Extremely	Very	Definitely	Somewhat	Mixed	Somewhat	Definitely	Very	Extremely	
-1.0	-.75	-.50	-.25	0.0	+.25	+.50	+.75	+1.0	

P-2: Realization of Political Values

PESSIMISTIC								OPTIMISTIC	
Extremely	Very	Definitely	Somewhat	Mixed	Somewhat	Definitely	Very	Extremely	
-1.0	-.75	-.50	-.25	0.0	+.25	+.50	+.75	+1.0	

P-3: Predictability of Political Future

Very Low		Low		Medium		High		Very High	
0.0		.25		.50		.75		1.0	

P-4: Control Over Historical Development

Very Low		Low		Medium		High		Very High	
0.0		.25		.50		.75		1.0	

P-5: Role of Chance

Very Low		Low		Medium		High		Very High	
0.0		.25		.50		.75		1.0	

I-1: Direction of Strategy

CONFLICT								COOPERATION	
Extremely	Very	Definitely	Somewhat	Mixed	Somewhat	Definitely	Very	Extremely	
-1.0	-.75	-.50	-.25	0.0	+.25	+.50	+.75	+1.0	

I-2: Intensity of Tactics

CONFLICT								COOPERATION	
Extremely	Very	Definitely	Somewhat	Mixed	Somewhat	Definitely	Very	Extremely	
-1.0	-.75	-.50	-.25	0.0	+.25	+.50	+.75	+1.0	

I-3: Risk Orientation

RISK AVERSE						RISK ACCEPTANT			
Very Low		Low		Medium		High		Very High	
0.0		.25		.50		.75		1.0	

I-4a: Flexibility of Tactics (between Cooperation and Conflict)

Very Low		Low		Medium		High		Very High	
0.0		.25		.50		.75		1.0	

I-4b: Flexibility of Tactics (between Words and Deeds)

Very Low		Low		Medium		High		Very High	
0.0		.25		.50		.75		1.0	

I-5 Utility of Means (Appeal/Support, Promise, Reward, Oppose/Resist, Threaten, Punish)

Very Low		Low		Medium		High		Very High	
0.0		.08		.16		.24		.32	

The verbal descriptor categories are borrowed from Walker et al., 2003