

# The role of the media in the elections

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**Abstract:** *The media still doesn't primarily decide elections on their own. However, they do claim and play an ever increasing role in the electoral process and also in the decision making process of the individual. Therefore the question arises: who, in Germany, is setting the standards for that which is supposed to be correct and important? Is it the media, which is necessarily dependant on exposure of subjects and their subsequent scandalization and also on quick ratings and circulation boosting journalism? Or is it still politics?*

## Media and politics

Over 2/3 of the knowledge citizens in Germany have about present political life comes from radio, TV, newspapers and political journals: hence from the media. On the other hand, the costly party campaigns are being pushed in the background. Also, the previously very influential components of the opinion forming process, for example discussions at work or within the family have nowadays less importance in the electoral decision of the individual than it was the case in the past decades.

Elections research explains decisions of individual voters and through that also the overall election results based on three measures of influence:

- Long-term connection of the individual to a certain party
- Orientation of the candidates
- Assignment of competence regarding specific issues to certain parties.

In the 50s/60s/70s/80s the long-term connection of the voters to certain parties was a major decisive factor for success in the elections, as was the case for large

(popular) parties. This long-term connection of voters to one party or the other comes as a result of being part of certain social groups (for example the Catholic Church or workers unions) or from the sense of belonging to a social class or a regional minority group. These connections develop through direct influence of the social environment; for example from contact with family members, friends and co-workers. It is there that these connections and affiliations to parties are being strengthened or weakened. However one must take notice to the fact that the importance of large social organizations (such as the church or the workers unions) has diminished continuously over the past twenty years: the number of church attendants continues to shrink and the unions also have to deal with heavy losses in their number of members.

In the overview the following are found to be true: the socio-cultural environments that marked the political landscape in the past decades are regressing significantly, in some fields to the point that they become irrelevant.

This is true for both popular parties in Germany:

- the socio-cultural environment centred around catholic rural and small-town communities that in the past was closely tied to the Union parties (CDU/CSU) is becoming more open in terms of party politics; the same applies for
- the environment marked by industrial development and influenced by workers unions (syndicates) that used to have very close ties with the social-democrats (SPD).

A very strong reduction in long-term connection to a party makes itself noticeable in both areas.

To that comes another, important development: more than half of the voters (and no longer only 25% as it used to be in 1996) regard the German parties as completely incompetent.

The voting behaviour is, because of this popular perception, completely skewed. Because of the loss of trust in politicians, only half as many citizens as in 1990 are still interested in politics: and where there is loss of interest in politics the preoccupation with political processes, meanings and goals is also decreasing. This has in turn as a result diminishing political knowledge and understanding of the political context.

What all of this together means is that an area for the short-term factors of influence on the choice of decision is developed: for candidates and for current political points of issues and problems.

A consequence of this is a completely considerable rise of potential change voters. The election results become thereby naturally open, and they depend much more than in former times on the current political developments. Furthermore the meaning of what politics has to offer in terms of topics is gradually increasing.

The political climate of opinion gets more mobile.

An above-average number of voters were, in the past two Bundestag elections, one week before the actual elections, still undecided which party they will select. These

voters have decided only shortly before the Election Day. For these people the media is the most important source of their political orientation.

This is the point where the influence of the media gets a new quality!

Media has always played an important role during the political process leading to opinion formation. Hardly a voter knows, for example, the leading candidates, who are set up from the parties to the elections to the Bundestag or federal state parliament, personally. In 99% of the cases, the contact with politics and the politicians in particular is usually made indirectly, by the mass media. It does not only work as a neutral instance, which strengthens the already existing, but it is also not a pure message feeder.

The media rather represent social organisms. And the representatives of the mass media (the publishers, the TV-Moguls and the journalists) appear in their media with their political preferences and their political dislikes. The medium representatives naturally have their own political opinions and conceptions regarding the meaning of certain political problems. And they show, not only in election time, but particularly then, which politician and which party they think is capable of solving problems, and which parties and politicians lack such an authority.

Not only through comments in the different media, but also through (conscious and unconscious) news selection, possesses the media substantial influence possibilities on politics (and also on the economy) – up to the possibility of manipulation.

These manipulation possibilities concern not only transported, political contents, but also camera perspectives, picture and montage tone. Particularly little politically-informed citizens are comparatively easy and defenseless targets, since they pursue the political reporting only sporadically, this being the reason for their difficulties in arranging the messages in a general context and also accordingly evaluate the political messages. Particularly with new topics and sudden events (2002: gun rampage in Erfurt and flood disaster in East Germany) the opinion can be stimulated in a short time, when speaking about the millionfold strength of duplication of the media. The political topic landscape changes suddenly. The large newspaper publishing houses and the TV-transmitters control so-called Agenda Setting, thus determining which topics are important in society and politics, almost perfectly. (Examples: Erfurt: Domestic policy/„hard line“/flood: Ecology/solidarity/crisis manager demanded – crisis situation: Time of the executive move.) By topic: Act of revenge/ massacre in Erfurt, done by a pupil suspended from the school, topics like violence at school but also violence in the media, were the order of the day in politics. Politicians overbid each other with actions and proposals, knowing, that the causes lie more deeply, and are to be evaluated more differentiated, because political shots from the hip surely are not the suitable reactions.

The media research has shown, that the main role of television, based on a specific combination of words and images (picture language), is to emotionalize and personalize the political decision-making process, while making the transfer of

knowledge or the analyzing of correlation a rather unimportant role play. Scientific questionings immediately after news and political TV-shows have proved how quick facts are forgotten or only perceived in parts. (Viewers of a TV-debate before the election have kept in mind the colour of the ties of the two candidates more than their arguments.)

The parties respond to the growing importance and influence of the media (especially television), by attempting to use the media for their purposes. This works only if the politics and the politicians adapt to the laws of the media. This can in extreme cases lead the parties to cover mostly issues, which are seen by the media as a very important parameter.

The mass media also has therefore a major influence on public opinion, and thus also on the polls, especially because politicians themselves want to be in the attention of the media. Media can build a politician and as well dismantle him/her. As long as politicians make decisions that allow assessment by the media, the everyday journalists have a fairly strong possibility of steering policy.

Even for a layman in media policy it is obvious that this development of the self-style of politics is heavily influenced. Not only political meetings will be staged media-friendly, even the presentations of certain posters have a clear media production, as are active in the General Secretaries expensive pinstripe suit as a poster. There are even posters that are designed and printed only for this purpose, the media presentation.

There are also actions of parties that are only started for television and picture reporters (e.g. CDU Secretary-General commented the, in his view, unnecessary increase in fuel prices through a fuel tax increase, with a gasoline filler pistol in his hand.)

Most important for the decision of the voters, however, is the increasing personalization of politics. More and more, it should be noted that non charismatic or not very attractive candidates are often left on the side in the internal party selection. How a candidate can show himself to the media is also important. Many party strategists also say, the tops of their party must appear frequently on talk shows, even some guest appearances in daily soaps or with the parachute from the sky to each campaign appearance. (Möllemann: Own suicide staged media-friendly, with a parachute jump, without using an parachute.)

It holds: Image is getting more important.

The aforementioned influence of mass media on what issue is important is undeniable. Competence is no longer decided upon in elections, but by the political climate.

Consistent policy implemented doesn't bring electoral success anymore, but the exact time-point landing on election day.

## Conclusion

It is also clear that the media, the cult of personality in politics are also involved in the call for the staging of politics.

Unmistakably, the impact of the media hysteria on policy, is especially increased by the rate pressure in the TV area. Jumping from one topic to the next, the breathless hunt for the next sensation. The policy will react to it, and will even be breathless. You lose the “long haul” of addressing the real problems of society (comprehensive renovation of health and pension system and the fight against unemployment) that would be needed.

In this way, the policy has become a decal of the media.

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