

It's the Debates, Stupid! How the Introduction of Televised Debates Changed the Portrayal of Chancellor Candidates in the German Press, 1949–2005

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Media election campaign coverage is said to have changed fundamentally in recent decades. Among the trends identified are personalization, negativism, more interpretive coverage, deauthentication, and horse-race coverage. Usually, U.S. studies are cited as empirical evidence for these developments. Recent studies of European campaigns have shown, however, that the picture seems to be different there in various respects. This article argues that one of the reasons for the differences might be the lack of some central campaign events in European elections. Taking Germany as an example, it investigates how the introduction of American-style televised debates in 2002 and 2005 changed media coverage of the major candidates. On the basis of a long-term content analysis between 1949 and 2005, several dramatic effects of this new campaign event are shown.

Keywords: *televised debates; campaign coverage; Germany*

Mediatization, Americanization, and Trends of Election Coverage

For some three decades, scholars of political communication have been discussing various kinds of long-term changes of political communication. In these discussions, the mediatization hypothesis has become very popular. It postulates that the expansion of mass media and the emergence of new media have fundamentally transformed the democratic process. In that view, the media have moved to the center of the political process, changing candidate,

party, and voter behavior (e.g., Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Kepplinger 2002; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Schulz 2004).

Long-Term Trends of Campaign Coverage

Paralleling the rise of the media to the very center of the political process, their way of portraying electoral campaigns and candidates is said to have changed fundamentally. Among the trends identified are **increasing personalization, increasing negativism, a tendency toward more interpretive coverage, a deauthentication of the portrayal of candidates, and more horse-race coverage.** Usually, U.S.-American studies are cited as empirical evidence for these developments (see, e.g., Reinemann and Wilke 2001). Similar trends in Europe have often been viewed as indicators of an “Americanization” of election campaigning and coverage (see, e.g., Schulz et al. 2005). Recent studies of European election campaigning, election media coverage, and voting behavior have shown, however, that the picture seems to be different there in various respects. This seems to have to do with differences of political communication cultures between the United States and European countries, such as Germany (Pfetsch 2001).

As far as campaigning practices are concerned, studies indicate that European campaign managers have not uncritically adopted American techniques and styles of campaigning. Because of the peculiarities of political, voting, and media systems, as well as media use and attitudinal structures of the electorates, they developed a third way between American-style campaigns and the campaigns traditionally conducted in their countries (“hybridization”; Plasser and Plasser 2002: 343–51; see also Esser et al. 2000).

As far as the use of media and political information is concerned, studies show that, for example, several European countries are still more newspaper centered than the United States (e.g., Plasser and Plasser 2002; Schulz et al. 2005). Therefore, newspapers are still very important in election campaigns in countries such as Germany and often affect voting behavior as much as television (e.g., Schmitt-Beck 2004; Schönbach and Lauf 2002; Schulz et al. 2005; but also for the United States, see Druckman 2005).

As far as media election coverage is concerned, a study of German press coverage of all national elections between 1949 and 1998 hardly identified any linear long-term trends (Reinemann and Wilke 2001). The only exceptions regarded the journalistic formats of presentation and the length of the quotation of the candidates (“sound-” or “text-bites”). But **as far as the amount of coverage, personalization, and negativism were concerned, no linear long-term trends could be detected.** The authors concluded that the differences between individual elections greatly depended on the constellation of candidates, political circumstances, and the competing news events happening during the election campaign. In their longitudinal study of German television campaign coverage, Schulz et al. (2005) could neither identify an increase of “bad news” about the

candidates, nor had they a clear indication of a deauthentication of the portrayal of candidates. The majority of empirical studies conducted in Germany and other European countries, then, seem to support several authors who argue that the development of campaign communication is not adequately described by the term *Americanization* (e.g., Blumler and Gurevitch 2001; Papathanassopoulos 2000; Schönbach 1996; Schulz et al. 2005).

Televised Debates as Reasons for International Differences in Campaign Coverage

Since the 1970s, the spreading of televised debates has become part of the modernization and personalization of election campaigns throughout the world. At the end of the 1970s, televised debates were common in only ten countries. By the end of the 1990s, they were a regular part of general elections in at least thirty-five nations (Plasser and Plasser 2002). It is very likely that the number has increased since then, because there are various countries in which televised debates have been held for the first time in the past few years (e.g., Taiwan, Ukraine). In several countries, content analyses have shown that **televised debates generate more media attention than any other single campaign event** (Coleman 2000). This is especially true for the United States (e.g., McKinney and Carlin 2004).

Having that in mind, it seems plausible that the very absence of televised debates might at least in part be the reason for different levels of, for example, personalization of campaign coverage or horse-race journalism between the United States and other countries. In fact, some authors have already argued in that direction. For example, the fact that various trends found in the United States could not be identified in German election coverage has been attributed to the differing dramaturgy of the campaigns. Trying to explain the great variance between campaign coverage for different German national elections, Reinemann and Wilke (2001) argued: "Whether a candidate appears to be interesting and whether the race is tight seems to be more crucial for the character and amount of campaign coverage in Germany than in the US. This may be also related to the fact that US-American elections are characterized by a fixed dramaturgy consisting of primaries, conventions, TV-debates, and candidates being on the campaign trail, which leads to a more constant coverage" (p. 310). Generally, this raises the question of how the existence of specific kinds of campaign events influences the amount and character of media election coverage.

A new development in German election campaigning provides us with the possibility to test whether the introduction of certain campaign events changes the way the media portray the candidates. During the 2002 national German election, two American-style televised debates were held for the first time in national German election campaigns. The debates differed from the ones held

between 1969 and 1987 in a number of ways. The major innovation was that only the two major candidates for the chancellorship were admitted to the debates, which was the result of an agreement between the TV stations and the candidates' parties. Besides the candidates, each debate involved two journalists. In the next—early—election of 2005, only one debate was held. But again it only involved the candidates of the two biggest parties. The televised debates became the most important media events of the campaign in 2002 and 2005: They reached a greater audience than any other single campaign event. In 2002, for example, 65 percent of Germans watched at least one debate. In addition, several studies show considerable impacts of the debates on candidate images, knowledge, and voting (see Maurer et al. 2007; Reinemann and Maurer 2005).

Research Questions

Against the backdrop of the literature reviewed, the purpose of this article is twofold: First, we want to see how the coverage of the German chancellor candidates developed after the period between 1949 and 1998, which we already analyzed in detail elsewhere (Reinemann and Wilke 2001). Second, we are especially interested in whether the introduction of American-style televised debates in 2002 changed the structures of the portrayal of the German chancellor candidates in the campaigns. We will answer this question on the basis of a longitudinal content analysis of election coverage in all German national elections between 1949 and 2005. More specifically, we want to focus on the following research questions:

1. How extensively did the German press cover the national election campaigns between 1949 and 2005 (*amount of coverage*)?
2. How strong was the interpretive character of the press coverage of the national election campaigns between 1949 and 2005 (*interpretive character*)?
3. How intense was the coverage of the candidates for the chancellorship and by which criteria were they judged in the German press coverage of the national election campaigns between 1949 and 2005 (*personalization*)?
4. How often and how long were the candidates for the chancellorship quoted in the coverage of the German press of the national elections between 1949 and 2005 (*authenticity*)?
5. How were the candidates for the chancellorship evaluated in the German press coverage of the national elections between 1949 and 2005 (*negativism*)?

Method

To answer our research questions, we content analyzed the political sections of four national daily German newspapers: *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), and *Die Welt* (DW). Two main reasons speak for the selection of these particular sources: First, all four newspapers

play an opinion-leading role in the German media system (see, e.g., Reinemann 2003). Second, they represent the political spectrum between left (*FR*), midleft (*SZ*), midright (*FAZ*), and right (*DW*) (see, e.g., Maurer and Reinemann 2006). Television was not included in the analysis because only in the mid-1960s did it become an important source of political information, and unfortunately, the relevant programs are not available for the whole period under study. We did not analyze magazines or the tabloid press because there was only one influential national political magazine in Germany until 1993 (*Der Spiegel*), and there is only one national tabloid to date (*Bild-Zeitung*). Both have a clear political leaning. Furthermore, a number of authors convincingly argue that there is empirical evidence that suggests that television does not generally have a greater effect on voting decisions or candidate images than newspapers—especially in Europe (see above). This also speaks for our selection of the four aforementioned leading national newspapers.

Our analysis focused on the last four weeks of each election campaign. German parties usually concentrate their campaigning efforts on this period of time, which is therefore considered the “hot phase” of the election campaign (Hetterich 2000). Units of analysis were all articles in which the election campaign or one of the candidates was mentioned in either its headline or its first paragraph. We will refer to the so defined articles as “campaign coverage.” A probability sample of every second article was coded. In the articles, all evaluative statements about the candidates and all photos of them were analyzed as well. Together, 5,863 articles, 3,565 evaluative statements, and 327 photos were coded.

The data presented here were gathered in three steps. The first analysis comprised the period between 1949 and 1998. Results of this project were published in English by Reinemann and Wilke (2001). In the following national elections, in 2002 and 2005, the study was replicated and the results published only in German after each of the elections. Therefore, we will mostly focus on the changes in 2002 and 2005. All in all, fifteen students of communication participated in the coding over the years. They were trained extensively and systematically rotated over the newspapers and elections. During coding, regular meetings were held to discuss open questions. After training and after coding, reliability tests were conducted with fifteen articles and four coders, respectively. As a measure of reliability, we calculated the average of pairwise agreements (of a particular coder with all other coders). The coefficients for the categories presented here varied between 1.00 (reference to candidates) and 0.70 (overall tone of articles).

The main categories, which are being used in the following analysis, are (a) reference to the candidates (candidate is mentioned, explicitly evaluated, seen on photos), (b) format (hard news, opinion, feature, other), (c) authorship (journalist, news agencies), (d) length of candidate quotes, (e) criteria by which

candidates are judged in evaluative statements (competence, character, appearance, attitudes, relations to others), and (f) the overall tone of an article regarding the candidates (positive, negative, ambiguous, no tendency).

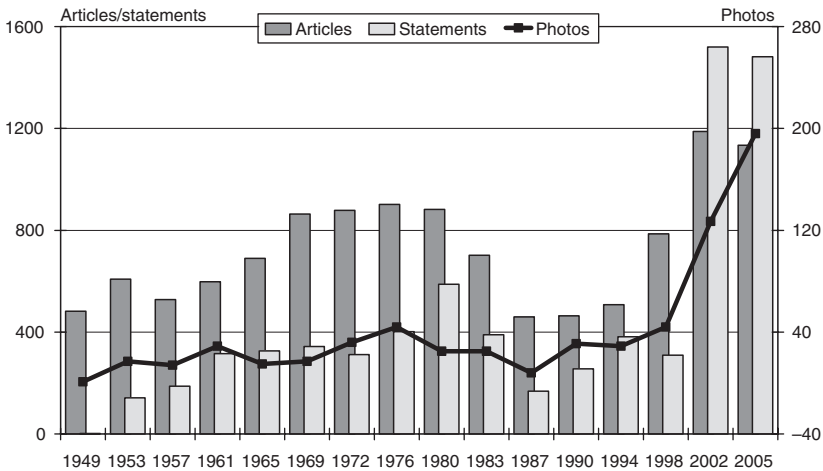
Results

Amount of Coverage

The amount of campaign coverage is a basic indicator for the importance the media ascribe to an election. Looking at the national elections since 1949, there has been considerable variance in the amount of coverage. This can be explained in part by the increase of editorial pages in German newspapers. From the beginning of the 1950s until the middle of the 1990s, the extent of the domestic and foreign politics sections increased continuously, from an average of 3.4 to an average of 7.5 pages (Kepplinger 2002). But the circumstances of the respective elections also influenced the amount of campaign coverage. Over the whole period under study, several phases are visible: After an increase of campaign coverage until the end of the 1960s, the amount of reporting remained on high level throughout the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. After that, the amount of coverage fell dramatically and remained on quite a low level until 1998. We argued elsewhere that the developments since the 1970s can mostly be explained by media-external factors, such as the tightness of the election race and competing news events (Reinemann and Wilke 2001: 300–1).

Judging from the number of articles, the amount of election coverage exploded in 2002 and 2005. In comparison to 1998, the number of articles rose by nearly 50 percent in 2002 and remained that high in 2005. In comparison to 1976, the election that the newspapers had covered with the greatest intensity until then, the increase still was about 30 percent. This increase cannot be explained by a rise in editorial space for politics in general. On the contrary, the national dailies in Germany had decreased their editorial space since 1998 because of a crisis in the newspaper industry that was caused by the rise of online advertising (Figure 1). That the campaigns themselves are responsible for the increase of coverage is also supported by the fact that there was a stark increase of TV coverage also (e.g., Schulz and Zeh 2006).

However, the increase in press campaign coverage cannot be traced back to the introduction of the televised debate. A day-by-day analysis shows that the number of articles was higher in 2002 and 2005 than before throughout the entire four weeks before the election. There was no increase in the days before and after the debates that could explain the rising overall number of articles (see Figure 2). Therefore, we have to attribute this to other factors: first, the closeness of the election races in 2002 and 2005; and second, the intensity of political campaign efforts by candidates and parties.

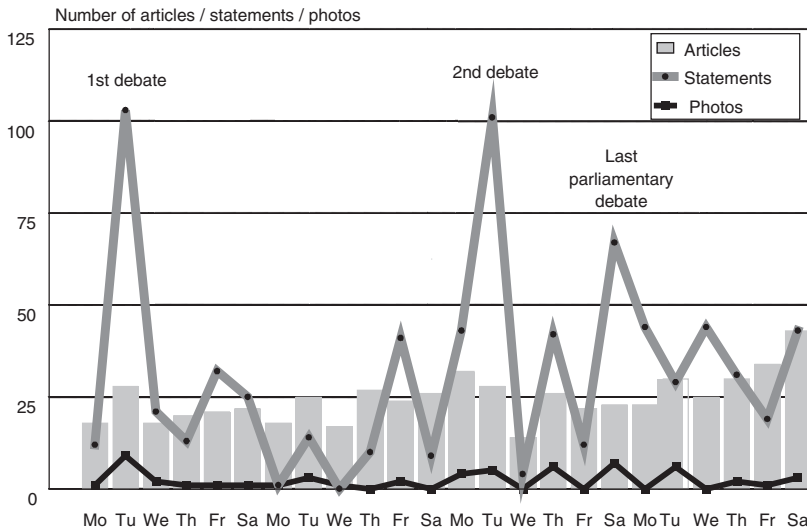
**Figure 1**

Amount of Campaign Coverage, 1949 to 2005 (Articles, Statements, Photos; n)

Note: Basis: Estimate of actual campaign coverage based on a sample of 50 percent of the relevant articles ($n = 5,836$). 1949: *Der Tagesspiegel* instead of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

For the national elections between 1949 and 1998, we found that the number of evaluative statements was above all an indicator for the heat of the discussion about the candidates. In that sense, the 2002 elections differed dramatically from the preceding ones. Compared to 1998, the number of evaluative statements increased more than five times and was also five times as high as the long-term average for the years between 1949 and 1998. During the 2005 campaign, the papers published nearly as much evaluative statements about the candidates as in 2002. The average number of statements per article remained on the level of 2002, which had been exceptionally high compared to all preceding elections (1949–1998: 0.48; 2005: 1.3).

In contrast to the increase in the number of articles, the explosion of evaluative statements about the candidates in 2002 can clearly be traced back to the newly introduced televised debates: On the two days following the two debates alone, the newspapers published one-third of all evaluative statements about the candidates (Figure 2). In 2005, however, the high intensity of evaluation was only partially event based. As in 2002, the debate between Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and challenger Angela Merkel in 2005 was a peak in media coverage about the candidates' qualities. And with 109 statements coded, the number of statements published two days after the debate was about as high as after the two debates in 2002 (103 and 101, respectively) (Figure 2).

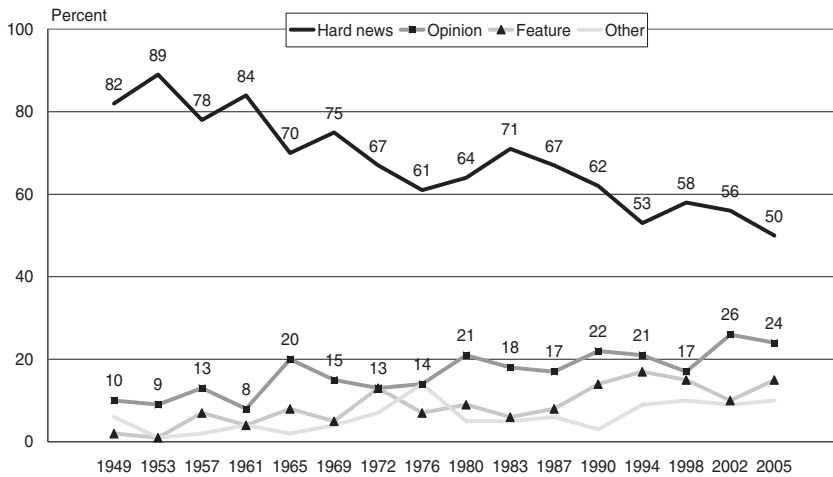
**Figure 2**

Daily Amount of Campaign Coverage, 2002 (Articles, Statements, Photos; *n*)

Note: Basis: 594 articles, 760 evaluative statements, 56 photos. Fifty percent sample of relevant articles.

But in 2005, there was only one debate. Consequently, evaluations in the context of the debate represented no more than only 18 percent of all evaluative statements. Therefore, the televised debate is only one part of the answer. The second part is the last three days before the election. Here, the papers devoted much more attention to the candidates than ever before. In total, the last three issues before election day contained nearly one-fourth of all evaluative statements (23 percent). We cannot say whether this mainly reflects the ferocity by which parties and candidates fought in the finish of the campaigns or whether the editors wanted to provide the many undecided voters with a last piece of advice here. Probably, both of these explanations are true to a certain extent.

One of the most striking changes of German daily newspapers' campaign coverage in 2002 and 2005 is the exploding visualization by the use of candidate photos. Until 1998, campaign coverage illustration was rather limited. In 2002, the number of candidate photos tripled. And in 2005, this trend became even stronger. In 1998, only one out of twenty articles was illustrated with a candidate photo. In 2005, it was every sixth article. These results are supported by analysis of TV news, also showing an increase of visual appearances of the candidates (e.g., Schulz and Zeh 2006).

**Figure 3**

Journalistic Formats of Campaign Articles, 1949 to 2005 (in %)

Note: Basis: 5,836 articles. 1949: *Der Tagesspiegel* instead of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

But although the debates surely made for good photo opportunities and were used as such, the visualization itself was not a result of the debates' introduction to the national campaigns. It rather was the outcome of strategic decisions made by the newspapers to strengthen the visual element in their publications and the improvement of techniques to print big-size, high-quality, color photos (Figure 2).

Interpretive Character

Our analysis of the elections between 1949 and 1998 had shown that the newspapers published less and less hard news. Since the 1950s, "objective" news coverage had been decreasing, while the share of more subjective journalistic formats (features, opinion) increased. Figure 3 shows that this long-term trend had occasional ups and downs but prevailed nonetheless—and was continued in 2002 and 2005. In 2005, we saw the smallest proportion of hard news formats ever: Only half of all election campaign articles were hard news reports. Every fourth article was an opinion piece, every sixth a feature, and the rest comprises other formats (e.g., portraits, interviews, documentations; see Figure 3).

In addition to the almost linear trend in the development of journalistic formats, there appeared another constant trend in our first study (Reinemann and Wilke 2001): During the decades, campaign coverage turned more and more into an issue that was covered by the newspaper's own journalists. The

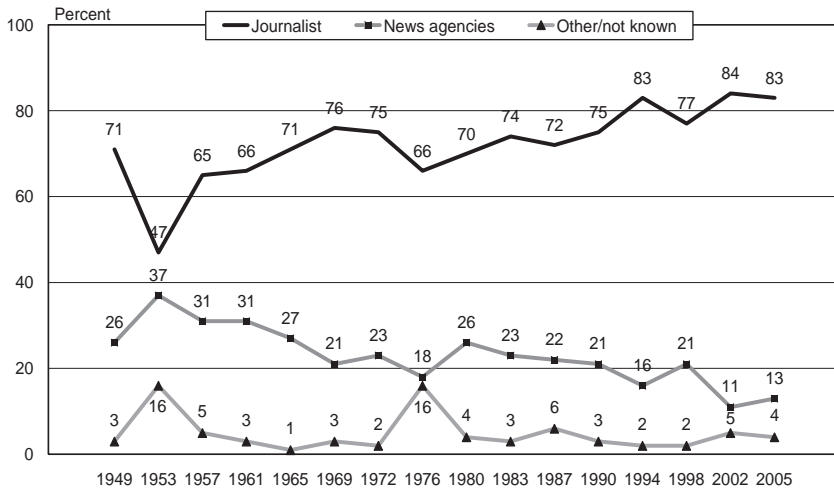


Figure 4

Authors of Campaign Articles, 1949 to 2005 (in %)

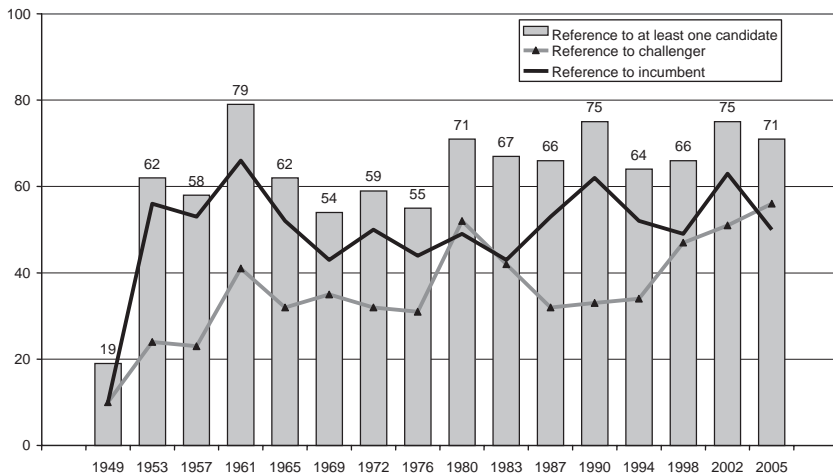
Note: Basis: 5,836 articles. 1949: *Der Tagesspiegel* instead of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

proportion of prefabricated material by news agencies decreased dramatically. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s a third or a quarter of all articles about the campaigns came from news agencies, this dropped to less than a quarter in the 1990s—in 1994 and 2002 to even only a sixth. And that trend, too, was continued in 2005 (Figure 4).

Dramatic effects of the introduction of the televised debates, however, are not clearly visible. Although a lot of features and opinion pieces written by the papers' own journalists appeared in the days before and after the debates, their number was also higher than between 1949 and 1998 throughout the campaign and especially at its end.

Personalization

The term *personalization* in campaign communication refers to a development in which politicians become the main anchor of interpretations and evaluations in the political process. In campaign coverage, personalization can appear as a stronger concentration on candidates and/or a stronger emphasis of personal or appearance characteristics (e.g., credibility, rhetorical performance) rather than political characteristics (e.g., competence, leadership qualities). To investigate the degree of personalization, we analyzed the articles' references to the candidates and the criteria by which they were judged in evaluative statements.

**Figure 5**

Reference to Candidates in Campaign Articles (in %)

Note: Basis: 5,863 articles. 1949: *Der Tagesspiegel* instead of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In 1949, conservative candidate Konrad Adenauer was coded as “chancellor.”

For the period between 1949 and 1998, there was no linear increase of personalization observable, neither with respect to the proportion of campaign articles making reference to the candidates nor with respect to the criteria by which the candidates were evaluated. But two phases could be differentiated when the exceptional case of 1961 was excluded (for reasons of that exclusion, see Reinemann and Wilke 2001). Until 1976, the share of articles that featured the candidates never exceeded 62 percent, averaging 58 percent. Since 1980, the average degree of personalization during the election campaigns was 68 percent—a gain of 10 percent.

In 2002 and 2005, the proportion of articles with reference to the candidates was again higher than in 1994 and 1998 and remained on the high level that we have seen since the mid-1970s. However, if we take into account the absolute amount of campaign coverage, readers were never before confronted with as much media coverage about the candidates as in 2002 and 2005. Moreover, although the share of those articles was not higher than in the most personalized previous elections of 1961, 1980, and 1990, there have not been any other two successive elections in which the candidates were present in more than 70 percent of all election reports. The introduction of the televised debates, then, seems to have stabilized the level of personalization insofar as they constitute a fixed campaign event that completely focuses media attention on the candidates themselves (Figure 5).

But obviously, the introduction of the televised debates also contributed to another trend. Traditionally, German election coverage was characterized by a so-called “chancellor bonus,” that is, the incumbent chancellor and his government usually received much more attention from the media than the challenger and his party (Reinemann and Wilke 2001). Since 1998, however, the media paid more and more attention to the challengers. In 2005, only 50 percent of the articles made reference to the incumbent chancellor but 56 percent to the challenger. Previously, no clear bonus for the chancellor was detectable only in 1980, 1983, and 1998, and there had not been any other three successive elections in which the presence of the challenger was higher than in 1998, 2002, and 2005. From a day-to-day analysis of the coverage, we can see that the introduction of the televised debates obviously stabilized the trend set in 1998, because it provided an event that by its very nature involves both of the candidates (Figure 5).

We have already seen that the number of evaluative statements about the candidates exploded in 2002 and 2005 and that this was at least partially a result of the introduction of the televised debates. We now take a look at the criteria by which the candidates were judged in the evaluative statements by journalists, politicians, and other sources. We differentiated more than forty single criteria that we grouped into five dimensions: competence and management qualities, character, appearance (e.g., rhetorical skills, media performance, looks), attitude (e.g., conservative, Christian), and relations to others.

The analysis shows that the TV debates in 2002 not only led to a significant increase of attention for the candidates, but they also drastically changed the relevance of the dimensions by which the candidates were judged. Especially striking is the enormous increase in the importance of appearance and the looks of candidates (23 percent of all statements). Taking into account the absolute number of statements published, this means that the newspapers published sixteen times as much evaluative statements about the “performance” qualities of the candidates than in 1998. As a day-by-day analysis shows, this again is a result of the televised debates: Most of the performance statements were published in the days after the debates and referred to the candidates media performance and not to the quality of their arguments or their perceived competence (Table 1).

For 2005, we got similar results, which nevertheless came as even more surprising: Even though only one debate took place, the proportion of the judgments concerning appearance and performance qualities was again as high as in 2002. Once again, 22 percent of all statements about the candidates concentrated on this dimension. Compared to the long-term average, the share of statements about professional competence and management abilities remained low (31 percent). Personality (e.g., credibility) as a criterion of judgment was clearly rarer than in 2002 (21 percent). With the exception of 1949, personality had only played a less important role in the media in the run-up to the elections in

Table 1

Dimensions of candidate evaluation (criteria by which the candidates were judged in evaluative statements)

Dimension	Election Year																
	1949	1953	1957	1961	1965	1969	1972	1976	1980	1983	1987	1990	1994	1998	2002	2005	Total
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Competence	100	27	32	48	41	36	52	37	20	48	42	48	16	68	29	31	42
Personality	0	47	32	35	33	32	26	37	53	26	24	33	64	19	32	21	32
Appearance	0	6	12	3	17	13	14	14	14	8	16	10	11	8	23	22	12
Relations to others	0	20	22	11	7	15	6	9	1	11	6	7	8	3	5	22	10
Attitudes	0	1	2	3	3	4	2	4	11	6	13	2	2	1	11	5	4
Total	100	101	100	100	101	100	100	101	99	99	101	100	101	101	100	100	100
<i>n</i> (Statements)	1	71	94	158	163	172	156	201	295	195	84	128	191	155	760	741	3,565

Note: Entries in the “Total” column are means of the percentage shares in the individual election years.

1998 (19 percent). A day-by-day analysis shows that, as in 2002, the essential reason for the great importance of performance qualities was the televised debate. Forty-three percent of those statements were published two days after, 15 percent in the two days before. On the Tuesdays after the debate, performance judgments constituted more than half of all evaluative statements (see Table 1).

Authenticity

In the United States, the average length of verbal quotations of political candidates in the press and sound bites of their statements in television news has decreased significantly since the 1960s (for an overview, see Reinemann and Wilke 2001). However, since the 1990s, the average length of the presidential candidates’ sound bites has remained relatively stable—although on a low level (“Campaign 2004 Final. How TV News Covered the General Election Campaign” 2004). In Germany, we have seen a reduction of the average length of candidate quotations on TV since 1990 but, at the same time, an increasing total extent of quotations (Schulz and Zeh 2006; see also Donsbach and Jandura 2005). In the German quality press, the total amount of quotations as well as the average length of candidates’ quotations saw a decline between 1980 and 1998 (Reinemann and Wilke 2001).

The elections of 2002, however, ended this long-term trend. Never had more articles contained quotations of the candidates (32 percent); only rarely had they been quoted so extensively (2,628 lines). But as the day-by-day analysis shows, this is not a result of the televised debates. The candidates were not more extensively quoted in the days after the debates or with statements originating from the debates. Journalists just quoted them more often in regular campaign coverage. In 2005, the proportion of articles with quotes of the candidates

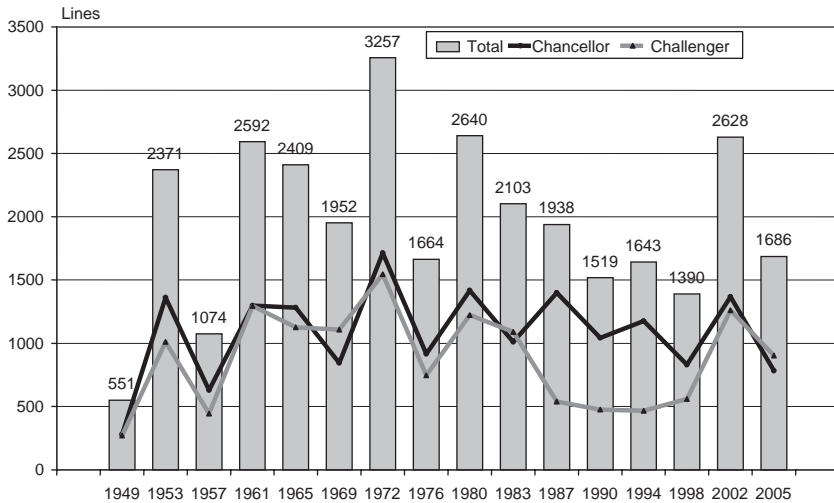


Figure 6

Amount of Candidate Quotations (Lines)

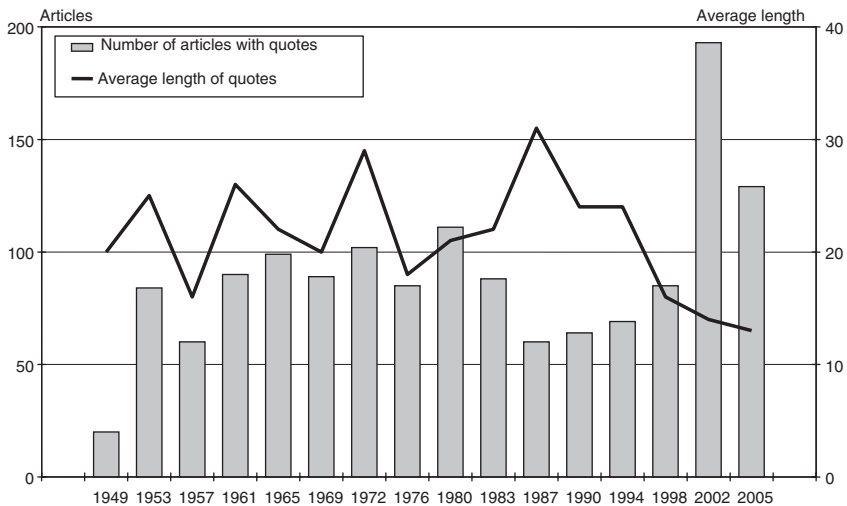
Note: Basis: 5,863 articles. 1949: *Der Tagesspiegel* instead of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

declined again to 23 percent, which was about the level of the 1998 election. The total length of quotations also dropped by 1,000 lines to 1,688 in 2005 and again reached the level of the years between 1990 and 1998. Obviously, this is not an effect of the introduction of televised debates (see Figure 6).

In contrast to the total amount of quotations, **their average length in the individual articles further decreased in 2002 and 2005**. Taking as the basis of analysis only those articles in which the candidates were actually quoted, we see that the average length of quotes has dramatically fallen from thirty-one to fourteen lines since its all-time high in 1987. In the run-up to the national elections of 2005, the quality newspapers reduced the average quotations once again by thirteen rows. This was the lowest value since 1949. Consequently, the trend toward always shorter “text-bites” of the candidates for the chancellorship continues, although we cannot trace that trend back to the introduction of the televised debates (see Figure 7).

Negativism

Our analysis of the elections between 1949 and 1998 had shown a predominance of negative articles about the chancellor candidates since 1980. Only the 1990 “reunification elections” brought a positive result for Helmut Kohl when considering all newspapers together (Reinemann and Wilke 2001). Similar results were obtained for the campaign coverage of Germany’s largest newspaper,

**Figure 7**

Number of Articles with Quotes and Average Length of Quotations

Note: Basis: 1,970 articles with quotations. 1949: *Der Tagesspiegel* instead of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

the tabloid *Bild*, between 1990 and 2002 (Semetko and Schönbach 2003) as well as for the television news of the four major stations between 1990 and 1998 (Schneider et al. 1999). In our new analysis, we again use the balance of the proportions of positive and negative articles about the candidates as an indicator for the tone of the candidates' portrayal. The basis of analysis is articles with references to the candidates.

What we can see from our data is that the portrayal of the candidates became more negative in 2002 and 2005 than it had been ever before, even though the balance in 2005 did not reach the all-time low of 2002. When we look at incumbents and challengers, respectively, we can see that the trend observed since 1980 continues likewise. Summing up all newspapers, there is a clear predominance of negative articles about both the incumbents and challengers. Although the political preferences of the four papers were reflected at least to some extent in the evaluations of the candidates, the papers sometimes also were very critical about the candidate closer to them politically. Thus, political leanings only partially and not in all cases determined the evaluation of a specific candidate. In addition, the political leaning of a paper is more likely to be reflected in negative evaluations of the "opposing" candidate than in euphoric approval of its "own" candidate (see Figure 8).

Did the introduction of the televised debates have any effect on the continuation of the trend toward a more negative portrayal of the candidates? Yes, at

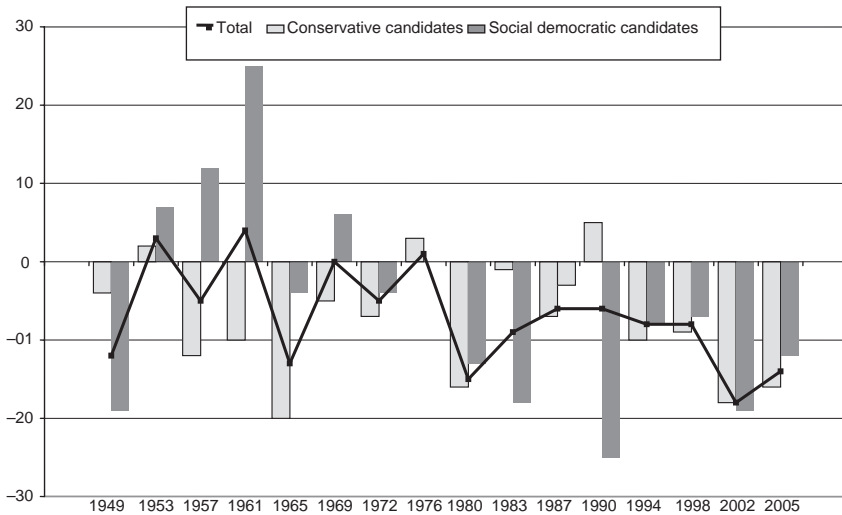


Figure 8

Tone of Candidate Portrayal (Balance of the Proportions of Positive and Negative Articles with Reference to Candidates)

Note: Basis: Articles with reference to conservative and social democratic candidates for the chancellorship. 1949: *Der Tagesspiegel* instead of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

least in 2002. Then, for example, the conservative *Welt* published a lot of harsh expert statements and negative poll results about the performance of “their” conservative candidate, who lost the second televised debate. Consequently, the tone of coverage about him became extremely negative even though the paper generally supported him. This means that televised debates can put pressure on papers to publish negative information about their candidate. On the other hand, the papers seem to have learned from that in 2005. Then, the papers were much more selective in the publication of instant polls and instant analysis. Obviously, they tried to stick closer to their general political leaning.

Summary and Conclusion

In this article, we have continued a long-term analysis of press coverage of the candidates for the German chancellorship for the period between 1949 and 1998 (Reinemann and Wilke 2001). Our interest was twofold: First, we wanted to see how German election coverage further developed in 2002 and 2005 with respect to characteristics that are regarded as important indicators for the way the media portray candidates and electoral discourse (mediatization, Americanization). Second, the analysis gave us the opportunity to assess the

impact of the introduction of American-style televised debates on media election coverage. Besides formal features, such as the amount of coverage, statements and photos, journalistic formats, and sources, we were interested in the degree of personalization, authenticity, and negativism. We can summarize our results as follows:

(a) As far as the amount of coverage is concerned, the four opinion leading papers we analyzed covered the national elections of 2002 and 2005 much more intensively than all preceding ones. Apparently, national election campaigns have become a subject of extraordinary attention. One reason for this might be that the campaigns themselves have become more important structurally because of the decreasing number of party identifiers and the increasing number of "late deciders." For example, two weeks before the 2005 election, 25 percent of voters were still unsure whom they would vote for. This also increases the possibility of influence of political journalism, which it can harness through critical analysis of the political players but also through agenda setting. However, the increase in the number of articles cannot be traced back to the televised debates.

(b) In contrast to that, the enormous increase in the amount of evaluative statements in 2002 clearly resulted from the introduction of the televised debates for the most part. In 2005, the newspapers were also very focused on the candidates. But several indicators point to the journalists themselves as the main reason for this high degree of personalization. For example, in the last days before the election, journalists wrote more opinion pieces and lengthy features about the candidates than ever before.

(c) The degree of visualization rose dramatically in 2002 and 2005. We can almost speak of an explosion of visual presentation of the candidates. This trend was pushed in the first place by the *Welt* and recently by the *FR*, which used much more photos after its 2003 relaunch. The stronger visual presence of politicians is of decisive importance for the impact of campaign coverage, because visual information leads readers' attention away from issues and political competence to personality and candidates' nonpolitical characteristics. In contrast to text-based information, visuals convey information about the candidates' personality but hardly say anything about their professional competence or issue stands. Therefore, this trend of visualization can be regarded as a further indicator of the personalization of media coverage. An effect of the introduction of the televised debates is not likely here.

(d) Regarding the development of interpretive coverage, the developments we already observed for the elections from 1949 to 1998 have continued. Although the proportion of hard news reports further declined, the four quality papers published more and more opinion pieces and features. This corresponds to the further decline of articles that originate from news agencies and the greater importance of the papers' own editorial staff.

(e) Two more indicators speak for the fact that the personalization of campaign coverage in 2002 and 2005 was higher than ever before. Although the share of articles that made reference to candidates was not higher than in the most personalized elections between 1949 and 1998, the absolute amount of articles mentioning them was much higher because of the explosion of the total amount of coverage. In addition, the introduction of the televised debates in 2002 seems to have led to a lasting shift of the criteria of candidate evaluation: Appearance and media performance have become as important as character or competence when judging the candidates.

(f) In 2002 and 2005, the traditional chancellor bonus vanished. In 2005, the challenger, Angela Merkel, even appeared in more articles than incumbent Gerhard Schröder; she was more often evaluated, was more often and more extensively quoted, and appeared on nearly as many photos as Gerhard Schröder. This also is, in part, a result of the introduction of the televised debates in which the challenger *per se* is as important as the incumbent.

(g) Results for the authenticity of coverage are mixed. On one hand, the proportion of articles that contained quotations as well as the total length of quotations does not show a clear trend. On the other hand, the trend of ever shorter quotations continued. Their average length decreased by roughly 30 percent between 1987 and 2005. The introduction of the debates, which surely provide enough candidate statements for long quotations, did not stop that decline.

(h) Taken altogether, the four newspapers continued the trend toward a more negative portrayal of the candidates that we found since 1980. However, only the *FR* and to a lesser extent the *FAZ* followed a pattern that clearly corresponds with their general political leaning. The candidate close to the newspaper was presented in a rather positive and the other candidate in a rather negative way. The *SZ* and the *Welt* also covered the candidates close to them more positively than the other candidate, but the total balance still was negative. At least for the coverage of 2002, this media dealignment was also partly a result of the introduction of the televised debates. But a structural effect of the introduction of the debates does not seem to be very strong.

All in all, the introduction of American-style televised debates really affected the structure of media coverage about the German chancellor candidates. In fact, the introduction of this new campaign event caused changes that were stronger than anything that we have seen in the period between 1949 and 1998. Most important, the number of evaluative statements exploded and the criteria by which the candidates were evaluated changed fundamentally. Therefore, the degree of personalization reached a level never seen before. Moreover, the introduction of the televised debates contributed to the vanishing of the chancellor bonus.

To sum up, from our analysis, we can say that some of the trends of German election coverage are likely to be the result of media internal developments in

the first place (visualization, interpretive coverage, and negativism). However, on other developments, media external factors were more influential (degree of personalization, criteria of judgment, and the chancellor bonus). The introduction of the televised debates changed some characteristics of election coverage much more than any other media internal development before.

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