

Is the Green Party losing its colour?

Why of all parties the German Green Party are in danger on climate change

Research links

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Green works. All other parties except for the Green Party themselves seem to have taken this campaign slogan to heart. MEDIA TENOR's long-term study shows that the Green Party has long let other parties overtake it on the biodegradable gravy train. In any event, the federal government, while holding the rotating EU presidency, came out strongly on the communication of climate-related issues. And even the coalition members, the SPD and CDU, are more vocal on environmental topics than the Green Party politicians Roth, Bütikofer, Trittin and Co. Nevertheless, the Green Party seem to benefit from zero-sum-effects in the short term: The results of the so-called "Sunday question" - voter preference for a hypothetical election – remain at about 10%, due to the lackluster SPD. For a party that is focussing on sustainability in general and the environment in particular, this development presents a risk in the medium term. Those who suffer in their key competencies could find themselves in the opposition for much longer than expected.

Everything seemed to be business as usual at first. In the run-up to the 12th world climate conference of the United Nations in Kenya, an internationally renowned expert published an alarming report on the progression and the consequences of worldwide pollution. A drastic reduction in global carbon emissions, the report urged, was indispensable to prevent a catastrophic economic breakdown. Climate change,

said the former chief economist of the World Bank, Nicholas Stern, demands an international response on the basis of joint decisions.

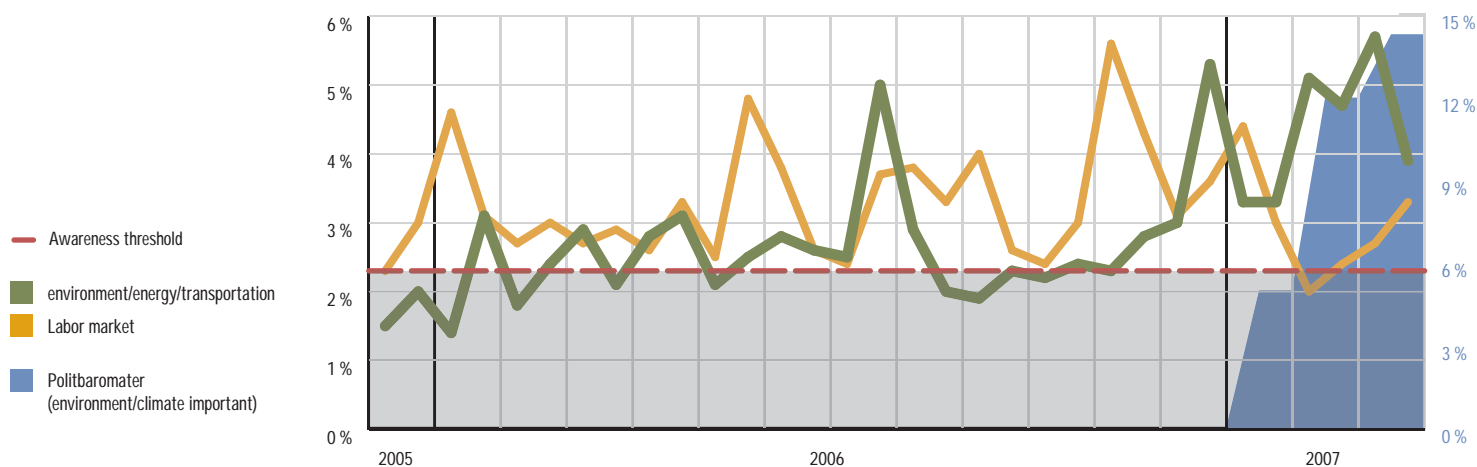
Classical Agenda Setting

Chart 1 shows that the share of news stories on the issue of the environment/climate has been increasing significantly (green line) since November 2006. At the start of the year, one out of 20 stories of **FAZ, SZ, Tagesschau, Capital** and other opinion leading media primarily dealt with environmental topics. For comparison: The always topical issue of the "labour market" (yellow line) lost prominence during that period. The increased attention of journalists, who dedicated themselves to a pending apocalypse with devotion, is also reflected in opinion research. **Chart 1** illustrates how the question "What is currently the most important issue for you?" suddenly triggered a much larger share of responses in the category "Climate and the Environment". Within only a few months, the issue advanced to third position in the concern barometer of the opinion researchers Forschungsgruppe Wahlen. It illustrates the typical course of the mass media's Agenda Setting function.

Opportunity for the Green Party?

The increased attention with which the public suddenly followed the developments in the debate on climate change, at first glance might have looked like an invitation to return to the public stage. The Green Party, as well as the other opposition parties,

1) Selected topics in the media coverage on Germany



Basis: A total of 154,409 news stories from or on Germany in 36 media outlets (* individual issues are missing)
 Opinion poll: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, December 2006 - March 2007, "The environment/climate is an important issue"
 Time period: 12/2005 - 03/2007

had fallen behind the protagonists of the Grande Coalition for too long. Now there was the opportunity to achieve a strategic advantage with a quintessentially “green” issue. Yet the thematic shift in the public agenda had no direct advantages for the Green Party.

The environment – a topic for the executive branch

Day by day, MEDIA TENOR analyzes ALL statements from and about parties, politicians and governments in the leading German media. Each statement is scrutinized, among others, with regard to its topic and assessment. Balancing those positive, negative or neutral assessments illustrates the way that parties are covered in the context of a particular issue.

Chart 2 shows what stake selected parties – or the federal government – have in the topic environment and climate (x-axis).

How visible is each political group on the given subject matter? The positioning on the y-axis indicates the tonality of the total coverage on the environment. Media coverage on the topical field of “the environment/energy/transportation”, which reflects all the necessary facets of the German climate

discussion, was primarily focused on the executive branch, that is the federal government. 52% of all statements between December 2006 and March 2007 related to the cabinet, 20% of which were about or

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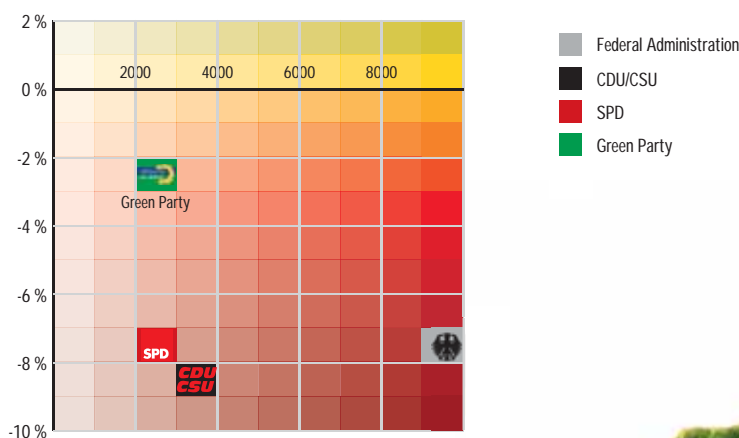
Presence as a communication strategy

From the point of view of communication strategy, this seems to be a dangerous development. The Green Party do not appear prominently on the media agenda regarding their most important political mission. This can turn into a strategic disadvantage regarding future elections. In democratic systems, political power depends on public support. Given the ever increasing share of swing voters, however, support through elections can only be achieved on

the basis of relevant information. This is why in democratic systems, the portrayal of politics through the mass media can be understood as an instrument of power. To control this instrument to a certain extent is the great art of political communication and its self-declared experts.

For the Green Party, the development presented a fundamental danger: In the context of environmental topics, they were covered below the awareness threshold, leaving them little room to manoeuvre the environmental agenda to their advantage. Other parties get the chance to decide which course the ship will take and who will be perceived as the “captain” of the journey. The situation

2) Presence and assessment in the coverage on the environment/energy/transportation



Basis: A total of 18,889 statements on the topics environment/energy/transportation by or about political protagonists in 36 media outlets
Time period: 12/2006* - 03/2007



of the Green Party should normally have led to a decreasing approval rating within its electorate.

Yet, opinion research does not suggest a drop in public approval (**chart 3**). According to the opinion research institute Emnid, it is relatively constant at around 10% with respect to the Sunday question. Compared to the yearly trend, approval ratings are even on a slight upward trajectory. How can this be explained, given that the Green Party are nearly invisible on the subject of the environment?

Priming effects

Priming effects in media coverage play a significant role in this. Since environmental topics have always been part of the Green communication strategy, they are said to have a basic know-how on environmental and climate-related issues. The party thus built up a reputation reservoir that is now paying off. The actual media presence plays a subordinate role. Readers and voters automatically associate the issue more positively with the Green Party than with other parties, which were not able to achieve such a competence lead over the years.

Chart 2 illustrates this: A look at the balance of ratings (y-axis) shows that the Green Party were better able to position themselves in the topical group analyzed (environment/energy/transportation), than for instance the coalition government or the two coalition parties separately. The analysis only results

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in a negative balance of -2.72% for the Green Party, while the federal government is portrayed much more negatively (-7%).

Consistent communication pays off

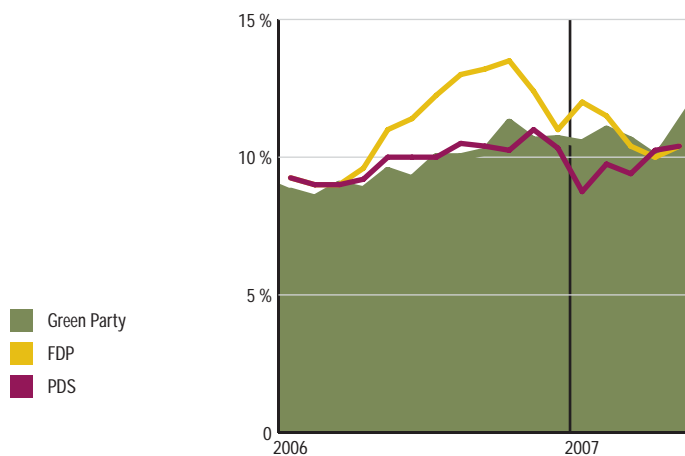
The continuous communication of a topical group over a long period of time has an essential strategic advantage: When the media focus on specific issues, they raise awareness and transmit certain values that can shape a party’s media image. Even if its actual media presence is weak, the already gained competence can then work to the party’s advantage.

Strategic danger

Still, the structure of media coverage should give the Green Party some food for thought. For the period January 2006 to March 2007, the continuous analysis of political coverage by MEDIA TENOR not only shows that the opposition party has been neglected overall, but also that environmental policies have become a topic of the government (**chart 4**). This may partly be due to the fact that the issue of conservation reached an international dimension at the beginning of the year. Opposition parties simply cannot act or communicate in the same way as parties in government.

If journalists start focussing even more on the

3) Development of the opposition parties in opinion polls



Source: Emnid, Sunday question
Time period: 01/01/2006 - 05/26/2007
(The time of reference is that of the actual polling interviews, not the publication of the results.)





Basis

Media: Daily newspapers: Bild-Zeitung, Die Welt, Frankfurter Allgemeine, Frankfurter Rundschau, Süddeutsche Zeitung, tagesszeitung **Weekly media:** Bild am Sonntag, Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, Welt am Sonntag, Die Zeit, Rheinischer Merkur, Focus, Spiegel, Stern, Super Illu, Capital, Manager-Magazin **TV news:** ARD Tagesschau (20 Uhr), Tagesthemen und Bericht aus Berlin, ZDF heute, heute journal, RTL Aktuell, SAT.1 News, ProSieben Newstime **TV magazines:** Fakt, Kontraste, Monitor, Panorama, Plusminus, Report (BR and SWR), Berlin direkt, Frontal 21, WISO

Time period: 12/2005 - 03/2007

Analysis: 156,409 news stories on the article/news story level in 36 media outlets (auf Artikel-/ Beitragsebene in 36 Medien (*Individual issues in December are missing)

49,742 statements on the topics of the environment/energy/transportation by or about political protagonists in 36 media outlets (*Individual issues in December 2006 are missing)

executive branch, however, the future of the Green Party seems increasingly bleak. It will be interesting to see whether or not questions of migration or social policies have the potential to replace this loss in the party's reservoir. (sj)

Open questions

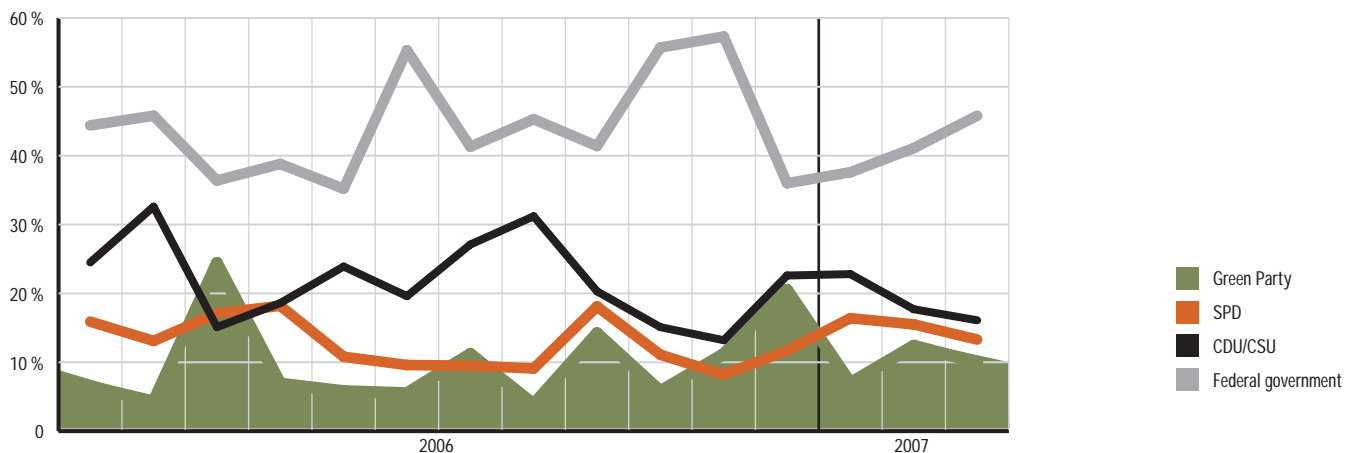
How long will the Greens still be able to benefit from their environment bonus?

How will the communication strategy of the opposition parties change, in order to create more public awareness?

Will journalists stop focussing mainly on the executive branch and attribute more attention to the opposition parties?

Can priming effects also be found for other parties?

4) The parties'/government's share of the topics environment/energy/transportation in political coverage



Basis: A total of 49,742 on the topics environment/energy/transportation by or about political protagonists in 36 media outlets (* individual issues are missing) Time period: 01/2006* - 03/2007