

„Agenda Setting can decide an election“

Interview with Prof. Frank Brettschneider, University of Augsburg

Media Tenor: In Bulgaria, voters get a chance to win the lottery for going to the polls. What has gone wrong for people to make so little use of their voting rights, only 15 years after the end of the dictatorship?

Prof. Frank Brettschneider: A lot can go wrong. People may get the impression that, whether they cast their vote or not, doesn't make a difference to their lives anyway. Moreover, they may be frustrated because their expectations were not met. Why should I go and vote, when the promised economic upswing did not materialize? Or as Bertolt Brecht said: "First comes food, then comes morals." First people have to organize their own lives and then they will deal with politics. Obviously there is a lack of information that one thing is dependent on the other. The American political scientist Key said as early as in the 60s: "Voters are no fools... In the large the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives presented to it."

MT: How do you evaluate the Bulgarian government's attempt to lure people to the polls by providing the prospect of winning a television or radio?

Brettschneider: It seems to be an entirely new perspective on the question whether or not the media can decide elections... No, joking aside: It is both a sign of helplessness and cynicism. Helplessness, because obviously they don't know what else to do. Cynicism, because it only reinforces the idea that politics is unimportant and just like a game. The next step would be to elect the next president by way of a talent show, the latest expression of media democracy... In fact, it would be far more important to demonstrate through political actions why the participation in elections is a crucial political right. On the one hand, politicians have to communicate this. On the other hand, there must be a range of political proposals, so that the people can see a point in going to the polls. If voting does not make a difference in the politics on offer, it remains worthless.

MT: In the West, the turnout is not much better. What are the reasons for that?

Brettschneider: I would disagree with that one. Abstention is not remotely as pronounced, at least not in national elections. In fact, turnout in German parliamentary elections has been on the rise. After all, the question which party leads the federal government really does make a difference. The European elections, for their part, are another matter. Voter turnout dropped to 43 percent. Never since the first direct election of the European Parliament in 1979 has voter participation in Germany been as low as on June 13th, 2004. It is attributed to several reasons: Some consider the European Parliament to be a comparatively insignificant institution with few responsibilities. The election is therefore thought of as a kind of second order election with few pertinent issues. Moreover, many lament that political decision-making within the EU is too opaque, that the European Commission works out its proposals at the exclusion of the public and that European decision-making processes are more strongly influenced by administrative measures on the national level.

MT: Let's stop here for a moment. What do you think of this allegation?

Brettschneider: Well, there are definitely deficits that deserve criticism: the inefficiency of much of the decision-making, the fact that Brussels bureaucrats spend their time and efforts on trifling issues such as standardizing the size of tractor seats etc. Yet this does not entirely explain the lack of interest. After all, the European Parliament has become increasingly important, particularly after the Single European Act came into effect in 1987, adding a number of important responsibilities. Today most of the European laws and directives require the Parliament's approval.

The European Commission cannot be nominated without its approval, either. At the end of 2004, for example, the Parliament asserted itself in a prestigious power struggle around selected commissioners of the Barroso-Commission. But despite this increase in power, the German television and daily newspapers rarely cover the European Parliament – only to ostentatiously lament the low German turnout in their editorials afterwards. Yet the question remains: Where, if not in the mass media, can the people possibly find information on the work of the European Parliament? Direct and immediate impressions are not available to the vast majority of

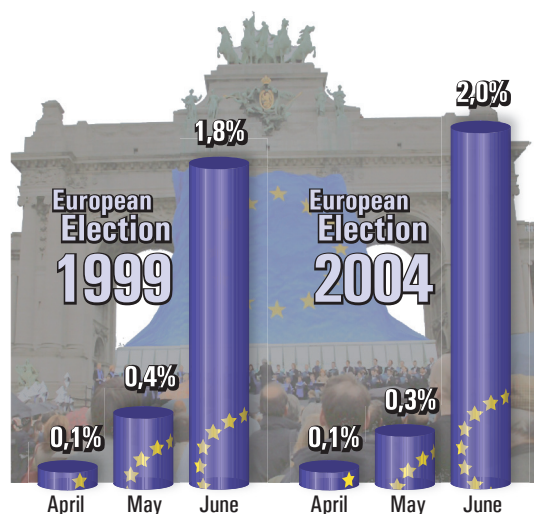


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people. Therefore they rely on the coverage by the mass media, as well as on the media's responsibility to inform, create a forum for public debate and control politics.

MT: How do you define rare coverage?

Presence of European elections '99/'04 in 13 German media



Share of news stories on European election to overall coverage

Source: Media Tenor
04/01 – 06/30/1999; 2004

Basis: a total of stories
in 5 print- and 7 TV- Media

Brettschneider: Firstly, Europe is a *quantité négligeable* in the media, it has not arrived in the editorial rooms, yet. In ordinary times, total news coverage on Europe reaches about five percent. The people therefore get very little information on European politics through the mass media. What little there is, often deals with clichés or routines, such as handshaking at summit meetings. Secondly, the media cover the European Parliament both rarely and negatively. Of the total coverage on the European Union, barely five to ten percent deal with the democratically elected assembly. The Council and Commission are much more often the focus of reporting. And when the European Parliament actually appears in the media, more often than not it is portrayed negatively. Against this backdrop it is not surprising that people view the European Parliament as unimportant and incapable – and subsequently abstain from voting. This was particularly true for the coverage in the run-up to the most recent European parliamentary elections. Throughout the preceding two weeks, only two percent of news coverage addressed the elections, the parties' positions etc.

Particularly in television news, it received less attention than the upcoming European Cup. Even before the first kick-off it attracted three times more television news coverage than the European elections. And Germany brought up the rear within European countries. In all the other EU member states, the media reported more frequently on the elections.

MT: Has it always been like that?

Brettschneider: No, the German mass media covered the first direct elections of the European Parliament differently. With positive results: The people's knowledge on the European elections increased. Campaign issues became more familiar to the citizens. The European Parliament was considered to be progressively more important and the turnout increased along with media consumption. In 2004, the international comparison showed: Wherever newspapers and television had reported on the European parliamentary elections more frequently, voter turnout was higher than in countries where the coverage remained below the awareness threshold.

MT: What other reasons are given for the low turnout and what do you think about them?

Brettschneider: Many also blame the political parties for it, saying that they only nominated unknown front runners for the European Parliament who would not be able to attract the citizens' attention. "Charismatic figures", it is claimed, are rare in European politics. For a long time, parties tended to send politicians to Strasbourg and Brussels who had become obsolete in national politics. So they continue to be accused of following the rule "If you have nowhere to place him, Europe can take him!", making it unattractive for the media to report on those candidates. There is some truth to this. However, that practice has changed significantly over the past few years, as was manifested, among others, in the candidatures of Daniel Cohn-Bendit for the Greens and Silvana Koch-Mehrin for the FDP (Liberal Democratic Party). But the parties are charged with yet another misconduct, namely that federal and Länder (state) politicians misuse the European elections to achieve domestic policy goals, for example by making "those guys in Brussels" responsible for unpopular decisions in their own country. Obviously this does not raise interest and trust in the European Parliament. Again, there is some truth to this accusation. But it does not tackle the real issue,

because in the end it is the mass media that offer a forum to politicians. In the run-up to the 2004 European parliamentary elections, the German candidates for the Parliament were more or less presented as “incapable extras”. “Extras”, because they were hardly reported on. Whenever the question of European integration was raised, the media passed the microphone more often to national politicians than to European parliamentarians – although the latter were to be elected. The dominant perspective on the EU was therefore national instead of European. “Incapable”, because in addition to being rare, the coverage on the candidates was also more negative than that on the statements of national politicians. With the FDP being the only exception: Its front runner Silvana Koch-Mehrin was the only one to receive predominantly positive coverage, significantly more positive than that on national or Landes politicians of the FDP. As for the rest, the media image of European parliamentarians was negative.

MT: Are there similar problems with the coverage on the national parliamentary elections?

Brettschneider: No, but we are dealing with different problems. After all, there is generally no lack of coverage on the German parliamentary elections, and national politicians often get on air and into the papers. The problems are elsewhere: Firstly, the personalization and popularization of coverage. The media focus less on factual politics and more on the candidates. When they report on candidates, they increasingly supply human interest stories (Angela Merkel’s haircut, Gerhard Schröder’s purportedly colored temple hair, Brioni suits, etc.) than analyses on the candidates’ political standpoints. Secondly, political coverage is more and more reduced to pundit talk. The politicians themselves appear less frequently with their original sound track. Instead, their behavior is commented and interpreted by others. The mass media increasingly present voters with interpretations, while denying them a comprehensive picture of the parties’ original positions. Moreover, politicians begin to produce pseudo-events (i.e. Guido Westerwelle’s so called fun campaign in 2002). And thirdly horse race journalism: The focus is on the competitive character of the election. News coverage more frequently covers polling results than the candidates’ positions on factual issues. All of this does not meet the voters’ needs. They do not make their electoral decision on the basis of Angela Merkel’s haircut, but with respect to the positions on issues, as they perceive them.

If personality was as important as the media make us believe, Heide Simonis would still be Minister President of Schleswig-Holstein, Jürgen Rüttgers would not be Minister President in North-Rhine/Westphalia and Roland Koch would never have been able to achieve the absolute majority for the CDU (Christian Democrats) in Hesse. Once again, Key’s statement applies that voters are no fools. Most of them take their electoral decisions – aside from long-term party affiliations – on the basis of factual issues, going by the topics that are put forward by the media. It is therefore of utmost importance for a well-founded electoral decision what topics the mass media chose to cover and how often they do so. Voters are dependent on factual issue reporting.

MT: Is it possible that political coverage, which is reduced to little content and lots of personality, not only triggers low turnouts but also makes polling results rather predictable – because everything breaks down to the question “who’s ahead and who’s behind?”

Brettschneider: Yes and no. It is true that, with the help of media content analysis, we can pretty much predict the people’s voting intentions or sympathy for candidates, as they are measured by the polls. However, this is not due to horse race journalism, but to the fact that the voters’ long-term party affiliations are eroding. The corollary of this is that short-term influences on the voters’ behavior become progressively more important, particularly the candidates’ topical orientation and perceived competence. Yet, those are exactly the kind of issues that media coverage has the most impact on. In addition, media coverage determines the importance of a given topic (Agenda Setting). The more often and more prominently a topic is placed in media, the more important it becomes from the voters’ point of view. When the people judge a party and cast their vote, they normally don’t do this by carefully analyzing the entire information that is available on that party. Instead, they use the information that happens to be “top of the head”, which is normally equivalent to the topics dominating current media coverage (Priming). During the 2002 election campaign in Germany, the red/green government took advantage of a shift in the media agenda – away from the labor market and towards the issue of Iraq. Agenda Setting therefore has the potential of deciding the outcome of elections, without even altering the voters’ basic political opinions. Agenda Setting alters the weight of these opinions in the overall

assessment of parties and candidates.

MT: Why were those kinds of media effect analyses not used for predicting polling results in the past?

Brettschneider: There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the theoretical framework for the media's influence on voting patterns was not as advanced as it is today. Scientists were quarreling about the question whether the media have an effect or not, focusing on the opinion changing effect of persuasive coverage. Agenda Setting and Priming theories then redirected the focus on the idea that opinions do not necessarily have to be changed for media coverage to have an effect on voting patterns. Secondly, there was no reliable database. Only a systematic comparison of opinion survey results with media

age on one topic, one industry sector or one party, without considering the context. 4. In general, it only looked at a limited set of media, either on national daily newspapers or television news coverage only. 5. The analyses were limited to a single country. All of this has only changed since 1994, when Media Tenor started to provide a unique database for the research on media effects.

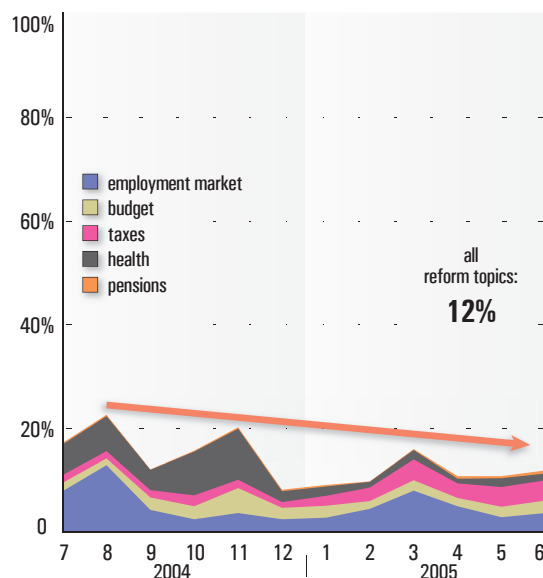
MT: Where do you see problems in the methodology?

Brettschneider: The method of content analysis is well established within the social sciences. In order for the data to allow for scientific conclusions, content analyses have to be systematic, quantify media content and adhere to scientific criteria. They must be valid, that is measure what they are supposed to measure, and reliable, that is the instrument of measurement must produce the same result when used repeatedly on the same material. The quality of the data therefore depends strongly on the quality of the category scheme and the quality of data collection. Securing this quality is a continuous process, which includes permanent training and control of the coding personnel.

MT: What should be added in the future?

Brettschneider: I see two main challenges for the future: Firstly, we should expand existing media effect theories with the help of content analysis data. It would be interesting, for example, to determine the awareness threshold that makes it more likely for media content to have an effect on voters or consumers. How often will a company have to appear in which media for its share prices to change? How often and over what time period will a politician have to appear in which media for popular opinion to change? It is an important challenge to determine these media specific awareness thresholds. Secondly, we should extend the analysis of media content progressively more to visual media content. Currently the analysis focuses mainly on written or spoken statements on parties, politicians, companies, etc. But how are they presented in the image? And what happens when there is a gap between the tendency of visual portrayal and the tendency of verbal portrayal, when they even contradict one another? What do the readers and viewers go by? A lot of basic research has to be done on that. In a society that is increasingly influenced by visual impressions, the effort of systematically assessing visual coverage is definitely worthwhile.

Reform topics in political coverage 7/2004 – 6/2005



Share of all statements (rest of 100%: other topics)

Quelle: Media Tenor Basis: Insgesamt 64.172 Beiträge in 33 Medien mit 01.07.2004 – 25.06.2005 1.396.347 Aussagen über politische Akteure

coverage could reveal the type of influence we are talking about today. Representative polls on voters' opinions have been well established for a long while. But systematic content analyses that meet the challenges of the above-mentioned analyses have only been around for a few years now. For many years, content analyses of media coverage suffered from one or more of the following defects: 1. The content analysis data was not collected continuously but only sporadically. 2. Complete analysis was the exception and sampling of media coverage was the rule. 3. Often the analysis was limited to the cover-