

Nagging doubts decide election

Germany's Christian Democratic Party, whose victory in Germany's parliamentary elections had seemed all but assured, lost electoral support because it had not been able to clearly communicate its goals and its competence prior to election day. That is the result of a comparison of **Media Tenor's** media content analysis and data from the Allensbach polling institute. The CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the CSU, were not able to mobilize their base enough to win a clear majority of parliamentary seats. The news coverage prior to the election nurtured some nagging doubts – the CDU lost its winner image, came under pressure to clarify its economic and fiscal policies and was not able to counter the ensuing negative news coverage with positive messages.

But, on the surface, the biggest losers in the 2005 elections appear to be Germany's public opinion researchers – the election results don't match their polls and prognoses.

Share of decided and undecided voters in elections between 1994 and 2005 (in %)

	know exactly	still deciding
10/7-10/11/1994	72	16
9/16-9/22/1998	70	18
9/11-9/17/2002	72	14
9/12-9/15/2005	71	19

(missing to 100%: no answer; will not/ most likely not/ probably not vote; undecided)

Source: Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach

While the results for the SPD, the FDP, the Green Party and the leftist coalition went up in the election by a point or two for each, the percentage of votes the Christian Democrats received did not even come close to the predictions – all of the public opinion research institutes had the CDU/CSU receiving more than 40 percent of the vote. In fact, with 35.3% of the vote, the two sister parties received their second-worst result after the landslide loss in 1998.

The difference between prognoses and the actual results cannot be explained simply by citing margins of error. Have all polls simply misrepresented public opinion before the election? Years of successful experiences with the surveying methodology and the fact that all of the polling institutes published very similar results ahead of the election suggest that, in

all likelihood, they can not all have made the same mistake.

There were dramatic shifts in public opinion in the last few days before the election, and last minute swings in the public mood such as this are not at all uncommon. Particularly voters who are generally less interested in politics are more susceptible to how the media covers the candidates and their parties right before they are going to the polls, especially if the coverage assumes an overall more negative or positive tone for one of the candidates.

So, were undecided voters the primary reason why the CDU lost votes to such a drastic extent and the other parties saw last minute gains? Both data from public opinion polls and data from **Media Tenor's** media content analysis contradict that conclusion. The group of undecided voters was not significantly greater in 2005 than it was for the 1994, 1998 and 2002 elections. The Allensbach institute has been asking voters the following question: "Do you al-

Polls preceding 2005 parliamentary elections (in %)

	CDU	SPD	Greens	FDP	Left/PDS
Election result 9/18	35,2	34,2	8,1	9,8	8,7
Allensbach 9/16	41,5	32,5	7	8	8,5
Forsa 9/16	41-43	32-34	6-7	7-8	7-8
Emnid 9/13	42	33,5	7	6,5	8
FG Wahlen 9/9	41	34	7	7	8
Infr. Dimap 9/8	41	34	7	6,5	8,5

Source: <http://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/index.htm>

ready know exactly for which party you are going to vote in the parliamentary elections or are you still weighing your decision?"

The analysis of the news coverage in TV news programs additionally shows that there was no clear trend in the news coverage favoring one or the other of the candidates in the last week before the election. The strong pressure on the CDU from the prior week had receded. At the same time, the tone of the SPD's coverage had become more negative again.

There was no strong pressure on the CDU from the media during the last week before the 2005 parliamentary election and the great losses it suffered on September 18 can hardly be explained by the suggestion that undecided voters went over to the other parties in droves. Instead, many of the undecided voters appear to have remained undecided and ended up not voting at all. This assumption is supported by the fact that participation in the election this year dropped by a further 1.4% compared to 2002, to 77.7% of all eligible voters.

Another finding supporting this conclusion comes from a comparison of the results of the last Allensbach poll before the election with exit poll numbers. In the Allensbach poll, 52.8% of all non-affiliated voters said that they would vote for the CDU/CSU. But according to the exit poll results, less than a third of them actually did. In addition, no other party showed overwhelming gains, except for the Linkspartei/ PDS. However, it appears unlikely that many votes went directly from the conservative CDU to the party at the far-left side of the spectrum.

A look at the social make-up of voters shows that the CDU suffered the greatest losses among its traditional base on September 18 – entrepreneurs, farmers and catholic voters.

A comparison of the polling results with the election results in Germany’s individual states corroborates the assumption that the CDU experienced the most defections among its base.

In Hesse, the Allensbach poll found that, as of a few days before the election, 46.4% of voters intended to cast their secondary vote for the CDU. On the eve of the election, the CDU ended up receiving only 33.7% of the vote. In Bavaria, the CSU likewise lost a dramatic share of the vote within days. Interestingly, the CDU thus lost the most votes in those states in which Angela Merkel’s presumably greatest political opponents within her own party, Roland Koch and Edmund Stoiber, are responsible for determining the course of public policy.

The data from **Media Tenor**’s content analysis shows that there had to be a sort of nagging, creeping doubt among CDU supporters in the run-up to the election. As **Media Tenor** observed as early as June of this year, “the analysis of the issues in the context of which the CDU was covered in a positive tone is a mirror image of the coverage of the SPD and the Green Party – good poll results and Angela Merkel’s position within the party were the most positively covered issues, not the political platform of the party. (...) The CDU’s advantage thus rests on a fleeting positive image and consequently only on borrowed power.” (see **Media Tenor** Nr. 150)

The party’s media image was built on ambition rather than on competence. The changing trend in

Ratings of CDU and SPD in TV news programs July to September, 2005

	SPD/Schröder	CDU/Merkel
7/4 - 10	- 1,0	- 4,2
7/11 - 17	- 14,6	- 10,3
7/18 - 24	- 11,6	- 4,9
7/25 - 31	- 7,1	- 8,1
8/1 - 7	- 3,3	- 6,5
8/8 - 14	- 8,3	- 25,4
8/15 - 21	- 2,1	0,8
8/22 - 28	- 10,4	6, 7
8/29 - 9/4	2,3	3,0
9/5 - 11	- 0,3	- 13,7
9/12 - 17	- 9,3	- 2,6

Difference between share of positive and negative coverage (in %)

Source: Media Tenor

the news coverage after Schröder and Merkel’s TV debate was apparently enough to stir doubts (see article on parliamentary elections). The CDU lost its winner image and came under pressure regarding its economic and fiscal policies, traditional strongholds in the party’s news coverage. The news coverage right before the election could not wipe away the doubts among voters. Only Friedrich Merz stood

Margin of difference between poll and election result (in %)

Hessen	- 12,7
Bavaria	- 12,6
Baden - Wuertt.	- 6,7
Saxony	- 5,6
Berlin	- 4,8
Lower Saxony	- 2,6
NRW	- 2,6
Sources	: IfD Allensbach, Bundeswahlleiter

for positive issues in the news coverage – but he was not up for election.

The Allensbach institute found that the share of respondents that perceived the CDU as internally divided increased right before the election.

In the past, the secondary vote was often seen as an expression of unity and party loyalty – apparently the same was true for the 2005 election. Ret.

Internal unity: CDU divided (in %)

8/23 - 8/31	42
8/30 - 9/7	41
9/7 - 9/13	31
9/12 - 9/15	35

Source: Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach