

## Political participation: national election study

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# Political Participation / National Election Study

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## **Abstract**

The chapter gives an overview of recent developments within participation and electoral research, and discusses the current state of affairs with regard to data provision and access. It concludes with several recommendations: (a) to tag a small number of key political variables as constant elements of the future question programmes of both the ALLBUS and the GSOEP, thereby creating substantial amounts of synergy at little marginal cost; (b) to establish a National Election Study in Germany by providing the current GLES project (which is funded by the DFG to study the 2009, 2013 and 2017 national elections) with a constant logistic and methodological support infrastructure by GESIS, and on the long run by providing a regular follow-up study to this project with a stable basis of reliable public funding and a firm institutional embedding, preferably by including it into the remit of GESIS; (c) to adapt the data services of the statistical offices in several respects more closely to the data requirements of participation and electoral research; (d) to establish a formal obligation for public agencies to submit survey data collected under their auspices in due time to the public domain for purposes of secondary analysis.

Keywords: Political participation, political behaviour, elections, electoral behaviour, voting

The notion of political participation in the sense of voluntary activities undertaken by free and equal citizens to influence the course of government is at the heart of the idea of representative democracy (Dahl 1972). To be sure, in liberal democracies no one is obliged to take part in politics. But if large majorities of the citizenry abstained from any political involvement, there simply could be no democratic politics. Hence, a substantial amount of political activity on the part of citizens is essential for the functioning of democracy. Therefore, describing and explaining how people participate in politics is a vitally important task for political scientists. Consequently, patterns and dimensions of political participation, encompassing the whole range of activities, from contacting local officials to engaging in acts of political violence, have been extensively scrutinized since the 1960s (van Deth 2003). Among the many forms by which people can make their needs and interests count in political decision-making, casting votes at general elections has always been the most important one. To the present day, it is by far the most widely used, and the most egalitarian form of political action. Moreover, it stands out as the one form of political participation that by its very nature is inextricably tied to the core principle of representative democracy itself: as it decides who is granted access to public office and thus to the levers of power, it is a sharp weapon in the hand of the citizens which enables them to hold office holders accountable to the will of the people. It seems just natural, then, that electoral behavior is one of the most intensely explored political phenomena. Most of this research has concentrated on explaining citizens' vote choices, while studies about turnout and its preconditions are less numerous (cf. e.g., Falter and Schoen 2005; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008).

Seven years after the report of the KVI (2001) this chapter attempts to take stock of the current state of data provision and access with regard to the subject areas of political participation and particularly electoral behavior in Germany. It first gives an overview of recent theoretical and methodological developments within the field of participation research, and electoral research more specifically, that appear particularly important from the perspective of data provision and access. It then goes on to discuss the current state of affairs with regard to these two foci in Germany, including developments that have taken place since the 2001 KVI report. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of recommendations, directed at either policy-makers or scientific infrastructure organizations.

## **Recent developments in participation and electoral research**

Since Milbrath's (1966) seminal study on political participation in the United States in the 1960s, participation studies have flourished, and quickly developed into a respected subfield of political research. In the 1970s, the first large-scale internationally comparative projects were undertaken, and comparative survey research has to the present day remained the hallmark of this strand of studies. Between them, these studies have greatly enhanced our understanding of political participation – the incidence of its various forms, its dimensionality, and its backgrounds, i.e, the factors that facilitate or impede citizens' active involvement in politics (cf. van Deth 2003; Kaase 2007). Since the 1990s, the field of participation studies has expanded and become part of a broader paradigm of research into modern democratic citizenship which conceives political participation as one of a whole range of facets of orientations of citizens towards their political system, including also social participation (such as associational membership and activity; cf. the chapter on civil society by Alscher and Priller, this volume), socio-political norms and values (such as civic obligations, tolerance, norms of reciprocity, or inclusion/exclusion), and support for democracy and its institutions (e.g., Pattie et al. 2004; van Deth et al. 2007).

The special field of electoral research also has substantially expanded its scope in several ways. Traditionally, it has been guided by a small set of related questions: Who votes, and for what reasons? Which candidates and/or parties are chosen, and, again, for what reasons? Typically, these questions were focused at particular national elections. Representative surveys of voters (often cross-sections, sometimes short-time panels) were the method of choice to answer these questions. In recent projects, this rather narrow frame of surveying and collecting data has given way to a broader perspective that seeks to understand elections as part of broader processes of political representation, including multi-fold and dynamic interactions between citizens and office-holders as well as candidates for electoral office, with political parties and the mass media functioning as mediating agencies. Along with this came a pronounced interest in the dynamics of the communicative processes taking place over time between citizens on the one hand, and parties and their candidates on the other, implying a move from cross-sectional to longitudinal study designs (Romer et al. 2006), and the necessity to go far beyond mere voter surveys in data collection (e.g., by adding candidate surveys, party campaign studies, media content analyses, and contextual data). Moreover, electoral studies recently have begun to broaden their scope beyond the narrow focus on election periods themselves, and are coming to see inter-election periods as similarly important for

election outcomes (Güllner et al. 2005), again increasing data requirements as need arises to collect data not only during the few weeks of the 'hot' campaigns immediately preceding elections, but also at more or less dense intervals during entire electoral cycles. As electors' political behavior becomes individualized and increasingly volatile, it seems clear that ideal designs to study contemporary elections need to include specific components for capturing the short-term campaign dynamics immediately preceding elections, on the one hand, and for tracking the long-term changes that take place over whole electoral cycles, on the other.

Closely connected to this is a trend of electoral studies becoming less 'sociological' and more 'political'. Traditionally, election studies tended to see individual voters and their attributes as the sole key to understanding the outcomes of elections – as if these were occurring in a political vacuum. Recent studies, in contrast, try to explore how elections can be better understood by taking into account the institutional and situational political contexts within which they take place (including the behavior of parties, candidates, the media, and other actors). Naturally, such a perspective requires to direct attention beyond individual elections, by comparing various elections in both cross-national and longitudinal perspective. Hence, elections themselves become units of observation in complex longitudinal and multi-level research designs (Franklin and Wlezien 2002; Thomassen 2005). Obviously, such studies are far more demanding than the traditional ones in terms of data requirements. Although older than participation studies, electoral studies lag behind this field with regard to internationally comparative projects – for obvious reasons. National elections are in many respects idiosyncratic affairs (beginning with their dates), and studying them in internationally comparative perspective poses serious challenges in terms of study designs and instrumentation. Recent years have seen significant steps towards successfully dealing with these problems. One is the 'Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES)' – a collaborative programme of research among election study teams from several dozen countries around the world (including Germany) which all include a common module of survey questions in their own post-election studies which are further enriched with system-specific macro variables to allow for multi-level analyses, studying interactions between system characteristics and individual behavior at elections (<http://www.umich.edu/~cses/>). Another is the 'European Voter' project (Thomassen 2005) which jointly with the German Central Archive for Empirical Social Research (GESIS-ZA) successfully undertook the formidable task of harmonizing data from national election studies from six countries over more than four decades (Mochmann et al. 1998).

Of particular relevance for the present report is yet another recent trend: a clearly strengthening interest within the professional community to move beyond single election projects and engage in creating permanent, integrated data infrastructures for electoral research. More and more countries are institutionalizing National Election Studies as part of their social science data infrastructure. In Germany a determined attempt to establish such a study started in 2007 (described in more detail below). Teams of French and Austrian political scientists are engaging in similar activities in their own countries. It also deserves mention that a multi-national team has been awarded funding under the EU 7th Framework Programme to carry out, at the occasion of the 2009 elections to the European parliament, a pilot study for the creation of an extensive European infrastructure for research into citizenship, political participation, and electoral democracy at the level of the EU (<http://www.piredeu.eu/>). Moving beyond an exclusive emphasis on surveying voters, this project impressively illustrates the trend towards broadening the scope of election studies towards dynamic studies of political representation mentioned above. Importantly, infrastructures such as these are not intended to serve exclusively the data requirements of scientists specializing in electoral research, but to address – by appropriate means of data dissemination – also the information needs of a more general public, ranging from political actors (MPs, government agencies, parties, organized interests, etc.) over journalists to members of civil society.

### **Data Provision and Access**

The 2001 KVI report did not include a special section on political participation, but an excellent, highly detailed stock-take of provision and access to data concerning elections and political parties (Niedermayer 2001). With regard to elections, this expertise evaluated the availability of data for purposes of scientific research on the whole quite positively, although it also emphasized – to adopt Lipset and Rokkan's (1967, 50) famous phrase – 'few but significant exceptions' to this. One of the most significant gaps concerned the general dearth of data concerning elections at the local level. This bleak state of affairs has remained virtually unchanged. In stark contrast to European, national, and state (Länder) elections local elections have remained a 'blind spot' and are therefore still extremely difficult to analyse.

Official electoral data are highly valid, and can therefore be used as benchmarks for data collected by means of sample surveys. Moreover, some research problems can only be addressed using this kind of data, including analyses aimed at understanding how political behavior is embedded in broader socio-spatial contexts (applying advanced methods of multi-level analysis). While the provision of data from official electoral statistics is generally satisfactory, from the perspective of electoral research revisions of current practices seem desirable with regard to a number of details. One concerns the residual category of 'other' parties. As a matter of information efficiency it seems appropriate to use such condensed categories in official publications, but the results of these parties should as a rule always be reported separately in computerized data collections. In an age of ongoing party system fragmentation, from the perspective of electoral research it seems desirable to get easier access not only to data pertaining to the larger ('established') parties, but also to those concerning the marginal parties, as they are an important – but neglected – research object in their own right (which can only be appropriately studied using official electoral records), but also because no one can tell whether or not they are indeed bound to remain marginal in the future. Moreover, it would be desirable if election results at all levels of the political system were as a rule added to all regionalized data files provided by statistical offices. An even better alternative would be to set up a comprehensive database at community (and city district) level, containing results of elections at all levels of the political system. A final desideratum concerns the data gained through the Representative Election Statistics programme. Research possibilities could be substantially improved if these data would be made public not only at the level of the states, but also at the level of electoral districts. Participation studies, in their turn, could profit from access to process-produced data, such as data on extremist organizations collected by Offices for the Protection of the Constitution, or police records of demonstrations and estimated head counts of their participants. In the United States such data have been successfully used to analyse the selection bias of mass media with regard to coverage of such protest events (McCarthy et al. 1996).

Survey data of high potential value for research into political attitudes and participatory orientations are constantly collected under the auspices of public agencies such as ministries and other government bureaucracies (most notably the Press and Information Office of the Federal Government), but also the public broadcasters ARD and ZDF. At present, only a small part of these data is routinely submitted to GESIS-ZA. This seems hard to justify for data whose collection has been financed by public funds, and that thus can be seen as public

property which naturally the public must have a right to get access to. In this regard the German Freedom of Information Act clearly lacks bite. Under the U.S. FOIA, data collected by public agencies are required to be made accessible to the public after three years at the latest. For three decades now, the 'Politbarometer' surveys as well as the state election studies conducted by Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V. under the auspices of the ZDF have been passed to GESIS-ZA. Cumulated over this long period of time these data are a treasure trove for longitudinal political research, without which many important academic projects of electoral and participation research never would have seen the light of day. While access to the equivalent data collected for the ARD is not entirely precluded, as researchers may occasionally use them on an ad hoc and ad personam basis, it were highly desirable if these data would also be routinely submitted to the public domain for use by every interested member of the scientific community. It needs to be reiterated that – as already emphasized by Niedermayer (2001, 38) – this also and in particular concerns the exit polls conducted at elections for the public broadcasters. Moreover, in view of the increased interest in the role of media and communications for citizens' participation in politics it were highly desirable if the data collected by programmes such as the ARD/ZDF study 'Mass Communication' and the ARD/ZDF 'Online Studies' would routinely be submitted to the public domain (on media data cf. also the chapter by Daschmann and Meulemann, this volume).

Concerning access of the scientific community to political surveys conducted by private survey institutes either for clients from the private sector, or for their own purposes, one can only appeal for an increased readiness to submit these data to GESIS-ZA on the part of these institutes *and* their clients (whose property the data usually are). In that respect, at least one quite large recent project deserves highlighting, although it only partly improved data access for the scientific community at large – a private-public cooperation between a group of academic researchers and the institute FORSA which provided a creative and original analysis of the dynamics of the 2002 parliamentary election, utilizing a very unusual and innovative data base (Güllner et al. 2005). Private survey institutes also for decades have been collecting data on media usage that are of high interest for participation researchers, but which have so far only insufficiently become available to the scientific community (cf. the chapter by Daschmann and Meulemann, this volume).

Turning to science-based programmes of data collection, of the various ongoing programmes of replicative surveys two are of particular interest to researchers studying political

participation and electoral behavior in Germany – the ALLBUS and the GSOEP. The ALLBUS is an indispensable resource for the long-term observation of trends in political participation and related topics. Fortunately, from its beginning it always has carried political variables, and every 10 years it has adopted political participation, values and attitudes as core themes. It is strictly to be recommended to carry on with this rotating system in the future. For participation researchers in particular it must be considered vitally important to receive updates of key measures of political participation and related concepts at regular intervals (as well as data pertaining to new participatory phenomena). In doing so, the ALLBUS' key working principle of combining replicative components with new (but tested) instruments to catch up with recent societal developments seems highly appropriate. In addition to the cyclical inclusion of political topics at a broader scale, each ALLBUS has always carried a small set of political indicators. However, the partial lack of long-term continuity with regard to these must be considered disadvantageous. In the past, ALLBUS surveys have included a number of important instruments, but several of them disappeared from time to time, either temporarily or permanently. Thinking about the future, a small set of standard instruments suggests itself whose constant and reliable inclusion in all upcoming waves of the ALLBUS would be extremely valuable for research into political participation and electoral behavior. Most of them have already been included in the latest waves, but a commitment on the part of the ALLBUS programme would be welcome to tag them permanently as part of the essentials of the questionnaire. These instruments include: voting intentions and recall of vote decisions (turnout and party vote) at previous elections, in any case pertaining to national parliamentary elections, the recall question ideally also for the previous state and European elections; party identification (existence, strength and party); party membership; left-right self-placement; interest in politics; satisfaction with democracy.

It would be highly recommendable to include this same set of variables also into the standard question programme of the GSOEP. This excellent database has not so far found many users among political scientists, due to its glaring lack of measures of political orientations. Traditionally, the GSOEP has carried only the standard indicator of party identification, but recent analyses of this variable have demonstrated how this unique data set could prove highly useful also for purposes of political analysis (Zuckerman et al. 2007; Schmitt-Beck et al. 2006). It would therefore be highly welcome if the GSOEP adopted at least the same small set of political standard instruments as essentials for its future waves. For three reasons, this would – at little cost – greatly enhance the utility of this impressive data base (as it is a panel,

this applies even to the data from earlier waves!); due to the uniqueness of the GSOEP's panel design which would open up unprecedented opportunities for analysing change and stability of political orientations; due to the fact, that it does not sample individuals, but households, thus allowing for analyses of the interdependence of individual orientations (cf. Zuckerman et al. 2007); and, last but by no means least, due to its core content of socio-economic variables – to be able to relate these to political attitudes (and their change) would be of enormous value.

While these steps towards ‘value-adding’ the ALLBUS and GSOEP programmes would be highly desirable in view of the criterion of greatly enhanced synergy at little marginal cost, they could by no means replace a genuine institutionalized programme of research into citizens’ political orientations. Although on the whole rather sanguine about the state of data provision and access for electoral and other political research in Germany, the KVI report with good cause emphasized a glaring gap in the otherwise very well developed German social science research infrastructure – the lack of an institutionalized German National Election Study that at each election reliably produces high quality data as a public good (KVI 2001, 66; Niedermayer 2001, 33; see also Kaase and Klingemann 1994, 351-6; Kaase 2000, 32-4; Schmitt 2000; Gabriel and Keil 2005, 635-6). A significant step towards remedying this disadvantageous state of affairs has been made very recently. Starting with the 2009 Federal Election, a major research project will be funded by the German National Science Foundation DFG that is to cover the next three Federal Elections – the German Longitudinal National Election Study GLES (Rattinger et al. 2008). As a continuous programme of empirical social research that meets the highest methodological standards, rests on a solid organizational base and transparent governance structure, enjoys the security of long-term funding, and is accountable and open to the entire scientific community of academic empirical social researchers both with regard to the input side (i.e., with regard to developing the study design, questionnaires, etc.), and the output side (i.e., with regard to data availability and distribution) the GLES will display all the trademarks of the best election studies worldwide. In bearing with the general trends described above, the GLES is to encompass not only voter surveys but also other components (a candidate survey, interviews with party officials, media content analyses), in order to be able to place voting behavior in the broader context of the parties’ campaign communications and the mass media’s political coverage. Moreover, the study is to include several longitudinal components (both repeated cross-sections and panels) that are to capture both the short-term dynamics taking place during election campaigns, and the long-

term dynamics over entire electoral cycles. The study will also routinely include the CSES question modules.

Overall, the GLES will constitute an important element of an emerging international infrastructure of high-quality data production and dissemination related to vitally important questions of the empirical foundations of democracy. It will be conducted in close cooperation with the German Society for Electoral Research (DGfW; cf. <http://www.dgfw.eu>) and GESIS. The former will serve as organizational network for linking the study to the scientific community while the latter will provide the study at all stages with logistic and methodological support, from developing research instruments to distributing the data via a web-based system. However, while being conducted according to the principles characteristic of high-quality National Election Studies worldwide, the GLES is still deficient with regard to one important respect – it will create an unprecedented data infrastructure for the next three German national elections, but not beyond these. It would therefore be ideal if on the long run the study would be continued under the auspices of GESIS, following the model of the ALLBUS which years ago mutated from a DFG project into an indispensable part of Germany's social science data infrastructure within the remit of GESIS.

## **Recommendations**

- The ALLBUS is a replicative survey programme of immense value to political research. It is essential for political scientists that it carries on with its tried and tested rotating system of integrating broad political topics at regular intervals in the future. Moreover, it is strongly recommended that both the ALLBUS and the GSOEP tag a small number of key political variables (listed above) as constant elements of their future question programmes, ideally to be included in each wave. For the scientific organizations responsible for these two research programmes, 'value-adding' the ALLBUS and the GSOEP in such a way would open the possibility to create substantial amounts of synergy at little marginal cost.
- Responding to a grave deficit diagnosed by the 2001 KVI report, a determined collective attempt has recently been started to close a glaring gap in the otherwise very well developed German infrastructure of high-quality programmes of replicative social science data collection, by seeking to institutionalize a German National Election Study. On the long run, following the model of well-established continuous research programmes such as the ALLBUS and the GSOEP (which are mostly designed to cater to the data

requirements of sociologists and economists) permanent funding and institutional integration into an overarching scientific infrastructure organization suggests itself for this project; GESIS seems particularly suited for this purpose. Permanently establishing this study beyond the present DFG project GLES which is to cover the next three German Federal Elections would create an ideal supplement to the existing programmes of replicative surveys in Germany and generate unprecedented synergies with these. It is therefore strongly to be recommended to policy-makers and research administrators to follow the model of other countries by providing the German National Election Study with a stable financial basis of reliable public funding and an institutional embedding beyond the present GLES project, ideally by including it into the remit of GESIS.

- Concerning electoral data provided by the statistical offices several expansions of data services are to be recommended (better provision of data on local elections, ideally as part of a comprehensive database at community (and city district) level, containing results of elections at all levels of the political system; detailed provision of electoral data on marginal parties in computerized form; addition of electoral data to regionalized data files; publication of data from the Representative Election Statistics at the level of electoral districts). In addition it is recommended to generate access to process-produced data pertaining to acts of collective (unconventional) participation.
- It is to be recommended to policy-makers to establish a formal obligation for public agencies (including public broadcasters) to submit survey data collected under their auspices in due time to the public domain for purposes of secondary analysis (with GESIS suggesting itself as the appropriate site for archiving and disseminating such data). In particular this concerns data of immediate relevance to participation, electoral, and political communication research.

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