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The 2005 Federal Election in Germany 2005 – an Analysis Sketching an Integrative Model to Explain Voting Behaviour.

Mario Paul

Abstract: *Despite the existence of various significant theories, finding one reliable way of analysing election remains difficult. The short-term impacts of election have gained more importance for voting behaviour, while socio-structural classes have become differentiated even further and party identification has become weaker. In contrast, the accuracy of statistical data from election polls and their coverage in the media suggested a high quality of prognosis. The federal election in Germany 2005 were a showcase for that. According to the author, psephology lacks a systematic combination of possible motives for voting behaviour. This hampers the interpretation of statistical data, because there is no comprehensive frame which restrains an over- or under-emphasis of single factors. In his article he outlines a research perspective that can contribute to ease this lack of systematic in psephology. His aim is to present a theoretical frame that brings together profitable results of psephology and provides new impulses for developing theories of voting behaviour. Only a combination of single approaches and thus the resulting formulation of an integrative theory – the main thesis of his article – is able to comprehend voting behaviour in its entirety and to accomplish a systematic weighting of single influence factors. A first test for this thesis and the outlined integrative model is the analysis of the German federal election of 2005.*

Keywords: *voting behaviour, theory, German federal election 2005, agenda-setting, micro-sociological theory, cleavage theory, Ann Arbor Model, social-psychological approach, political communication, framing process, hermeneutic, rational-choice approach*

Introduction

The German federal election in 2005 produced a surprising result. Contrary to all polls, the Union parties got only 35.2 per cent of all votes cast. The CDU and CSU vote combined was around six per cent less than the polling firms had anticipated. The disappointment of Union supporters with this poor performance was as great as the pollsters' perplexity about their inaccurate forecasts. However, they pointed out in the run-up to the election that a significant part of the electorate still had not made a decision. Do German pollsters have to feel like 'losers' (Ko 2005: 3) or should they resign as the former deputy chief editor of the *Stern* news magazine demanded (Priess 2005: 14). No doubt all polls published before the election were beyond the accepted margin of error. Nevertheless the main business of the pollsters is the issue of election interpretation, not prognosis. But their evidence (the published polls measure morale

not votes, and have to be understood as snapshots), had been ignored on the hustling by politicians and the media and therefore misinterpreted. So Gerhard Schröder’s mantra-like statement that he wants to win election not polls, achieved an unexpected validation.

Table 1: official final result and last published polls (survey period or day of publishing) for the German federal election 2005 (all data in percent)

	CDU/CSU	SPD	FDP	Linke PDS	Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen
Official final result (7 Oct.)	35,2	34,2	9,8	8,7	8,1
Infratest dimap (6/7 Sep.)	41	34	6,5	8,5	7
Forsa (5-9 Sep.)	42	35	6	7	7
TNS Emnid (10-12 Sep.)	42	33,5	6,5	8	7
Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (6-8 Sep.)	41	34	7	8	7
Allensbach (10-15 Sep.)	41,5	32,5	8	8,5	7

Source: own composition according to the summary on „Spiegel-Online” [<http://www.spiegel.de/flash/0,5532,11717,00.html> (17 February 2005)] and the official statistics.

Table 1 clarifies the differences between the last published polls before the election and the official final result of the election to the Bundestag. While the data for the SPD, and largely for the Linke PDS, corresponds well with the vote of the electorate, the large difference between survey data and the actual election result for the Union parties is striking. In the weeks after the election psephologists and commentators were anxious to find reasons to explain this bad election result for the Union parties. The following causes were primarily stated as possible factors: Firstly, the interviewed persons concealed their true voting intentions or they hoped to affect the behaviour of the parties by giving false information (Ko 2005: 3).³⁵ Secondly, Angela Merkel could not convince voters that she could be chancellor. Fifty-three per cent of voters wished that Schröder could continue as chancellor and only 39 per cent wanted to have Merkel as the new head of government (*Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* 2005b).³⁶ Furthermore, Merkel acted clumsily in her public appearances, less convincingly than Schröder and appeared almost to antagonize to a media democracy (is this a technical term?) (Priess 2005: 10; Drieschner 2005: 7). Thirdly, the Union parties focused their election campaign too much on the topics of the economy, labour market and taxes. By doing so they largely ignored issues like social welfare and ecology. But it is exactly

³⁵ Manfred Güllner of the polling company Forsa makes a similar argument: several supporters of the Union parties would have had an antipathy towards Angela Merkel. Therefore, they would not have voted for her although they had evinced that wrongly (Drieschner 2005: 6).

³⁶ According to polls from the *Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach*, 45 per cent favour the incumbent and just 32 per cent the challenger (Noelle 2005: 12).

those issues that introduce the human element to politics and are important matters in an election campaign – especially for a Christian people’s party. In addition, the recruitment of Paul Kirchhof to Merkel’s shadow cabinet was, for many citizens, becoming more and more like an ominous sign. He scared off large numbers of employees with his extensive proposal for tax reforms. He was under attack from the SPD, who stigmatized him as a radical reformer who was cold and aloof and campaigned against him, defining him as a symbol of injustice (Feldenkirchen – Theile 2005: 62, 64; Deckers 2005: 7; Drieschner 2005: 7; *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* 2005b). Fourthly, many middle-class voters gave their second vote to the FDP. Either in the hope of enforcing the reform lobby in a coalition of Union parties and the FDP or to refuse an SPD/Union coalition (Feldenkirchen – Theile 2005: 64; Deckers 2005: 7; *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* 2005b).

Not all reasons are convincing; others raise further questions. Tactical voting behaviour and deception can be based on a multiplicity of different motives. Such a significant deviation between the expressed voting intentions and the actual votes pointing in one direction is therefore quite unlikely. In particular, it has to be explained why, unlike other federal or regional election, especially this election, the voters wanted to conceal their true intentions. Such a bias is largely balanced by the recall-question.³⁷ Also, the overemphasis of the voter’s candidate preference must be a surprise. German psephologists largely agree that voting behaviour in Germany is only to a small extent influenced by candidate alignment (Gehring – Winkler 1997: 488). More than three quarters of the voters confirmed this in a survey (Infratest dimap 2005b). Certainly, Schröder was favoured as chancellor in comparison to Merkel by most parts of the population. But comparison with the incumbent is a burden that every candidate has to bear. Three years ago Edmund Stoiber was compared even more unfavourably to Schröder. Moreover, Merkel was ranked better in important traits and skills – such as credibility, the potential to provide jobs or solve future problems – as the incumbent. Even her clumsy behaviour was – according to election observers – looked on with fondness by the voters (Feldenkirchen – Theile 2005: 60). Further on, why was the unemotional election campaign of the Union parties and the “cardinal error Kirchhof” (Richard Hilmer cited according to: Feldenkirchen – Theile 2005: 62) only noticeable on the night of the election and not already at the last pre-election polls? In the last television debate of the leading candidates on 4 September the name “Kirchhof” had been connected with a socially divisive tax concept which would burden many employees (Feldenkirchen – Theile 2005: 62). And an advocate of social welfare and environmental issues such as Horst Seehofer was missing from Merkel’s shadow cabinet from the very beginning. Should not these unfavourable influencing factors have been already

³⁷ The result of the “Sonntagsfrage” (“If next Sunday were parliamentary election which party would you vote for?”) is statistically weighted by the recall-question (“Would you tell me which party you voted for on the last election?”) and the official result of the last election. Voters from a party who are under-represented by the recall-question in comparison to the actual result of the last election, are considered more strongly. In the reverse case it is vice versa. (Noelle-Neumann – Petersen 2005: 293-295).

noticeable in the opinion polls, at least in the poll published on 16 September 2005 by the *Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach*? Why did the voters give the CDU and CSU a feeling that they were in a safe position for a long time? Also, tactical voters do not decide spontaneously in the polling booth.

Despite some plausible reasons for the surprising election result, the remarkably large deviations from the pre-election polls are interpreted only unsatisfactorily. Too many possible factors have to be taken into account, and each of them is open to interpretation: At what time, in which direction and with what kind of effect the factors have an impact on voting behaviour? The analysis is difficult because there is no way of weighting the different influences on the voting behaviour. Party identification, performance of government and opposition, allocation of competence to parties and candidates, tactical voting behaviour or media coverage, the single possible impacts stand often incoherently side by side. This hampers the interpretation of statistical data, because there is no comprehensive frame which curbs an over- or under-emphasis of single factors. This statement refers directly to the theoretical basis of psephology. In fact there are several significant theories of voting behaviour. However, a systematisation of the base motives is missing. Thus psephology is still facing the charge that it approaches its object of investigation less systematically and does not possess an *ex ante* defined and accepted theoretical model of explanation.³⁸ By integrating the established models of the psephology, this article wants to contribute to ease the lack of systematic systematisation in psephology. My aim is to sketch a theoretical framework which brings together profitable results of psephology and provides new impulses for a further development of theories of the voting behaviour. Only the combination of the single models and hence the resulting formulation of an integrative theory – i.e. the main thesis – is able to explain the voting behaviour in its entirety and to accomplish a systematic weighting of the single influencing factors. The first practical test for this thesis and the developing integrative model is the satisfactory answer of the aforementioned questions.

First, I present step-by-step micro- and macro-sociological motives, socio-psychology factors which have an influence, rational considerations and influences of political communication for the voting behaviour. In certain places I have modified the established theories. I have done this on the one hand to describe them in a better way and on the other hand to save the significance of the theories, because there are social developments that challenge their suppositions. At the same time I gradually sketch the integrative explanation model and clarify it by schematic illustrations. Afterwards I will go back into detail into the still unanswered questions of the introduction. No new theory of voting behaviour is developed; rather I outline an integrative explanation model on the basis of the well-known approaches and their scientific reception. Due to its scientifically founded components it can serve as a basis for a uniform theory-building for psephology.

³⁸ This critic refers to analyses of the effects of election campaigns for the voting behaviour (Bretthauer – Horst 2001: 407).

Sketch of an integrative model of voting behaviour

Micro- and macro-sociological motives

In the study *The People's Choice*, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues showed that the social environment of the citizens shapes their voting behaviour. Family, friends, church, municipality, living and working conditions shape the political climate of the personal environment. During their political socialization citizens require a party identification connected with their social surroundings. Social control and peer pressure strengthen and continually modify them. According to the micro-sociological explanation model, the probability of making voting according the direction given by the group is more likely the more the different social circles surrounding the voter correspondent in a political sense. Vice versa: The larger the “Cross Pressure”— the influence of politically opposite social groups on the individual – the more frequent political change, lower political interest and lower voter participation can be observed. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues developed an index of political predisposition. The combination of the three variables socio-economic status, religious affiliation and place of residence proofed a high prognostic ability. That is why the authors made the much quoted statement: “[A] person thinks, politically, as he is, socially. Social characteristics determine political preference” (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944: 27). But that does not mean they are representative of social determinism. They also take political communication into account. The voters obtain information from the mass media in a two-way communication flow: directly and through discussions with opinion leaders. These well-informed and much highly individuals take part in political discussions more frequently. In this way they contribute to the embedding of the information in the social surroundings and to increase its meaning for potential voters. (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944: 84 et seq., 191 et seq., 199)

The micro-sociological approach still offers a good prognostic ability. However, it lacks explanatory power. The approach is not able to explain why socio-structural standards lead to a vote for one or another party. Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (1967) resolved this problem in their macro-sociological explanation model. According to this theory, profound historical conflicts such as nation building, reformation or industrial revolution cause cleavages within a society. Élités and social groups with different interests have emerged along those different, long persisting coalitions and due to them, parties with a firmly aligned constituency were established that represent the corresponding group interests in the political area. According to Lipset and Rokkan there are a few basic antagonisms in West European societies: Owner versus Worker, Centre versus Periphery, State versus Church and Land versus Industry are the most important. They determine, based on key cleavages, the basic pattern of voting behaviour and the structure of the party system. (Lipset – Rokkan 1967: 9-26, 47) The “Cleavage Theory” creates opportunities to establish new parties only in revolutionary situations. Only in such politically stormy times it would be possible to overcome the thresholds of the political system for a successful formation of a new

party (Lipset – Rokkan 1967: 26-33). This thesis has no longer compatible with the political reality of Western European countries since the late 1980s. The resurgence of populist and extremist parties as well as their electoral success questions macro-sociological theory. When confronted by new developments in the social and political system, the approach extravagates its explanatory power. Therefore, changes must have taken place that questions the assumptions of the Cleavage Theory. A more exact investigation of such processes of change is particularly useful for an advancement of the theoretical basis of voting behaviour. This can be a starting point of necessary and meaningful modifications of these basic principles. Therefore, I would like to deal with social transformation processes in more detail.

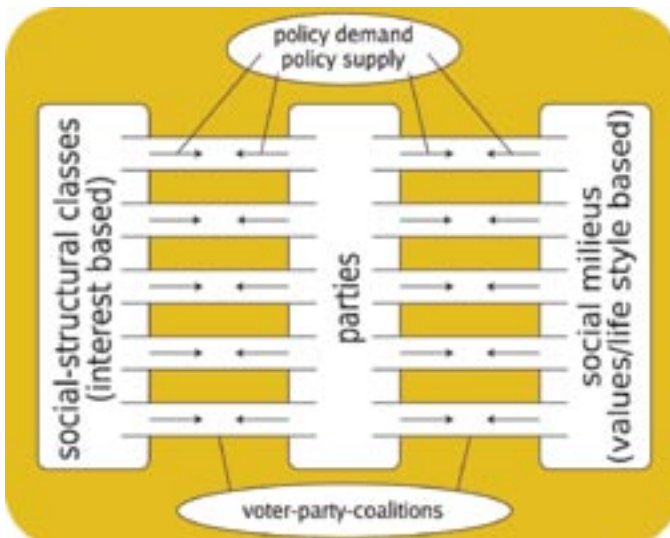
The social scientist Ulrich Beck (1983: 35-74; 1986) was one of the first to formulate the thesis that social transformation processes are stimulating individualization and diversification of circumstances and lifestyles. These processes undermine the hierarchical model of social classes and question its strength. Since then, the thesis in psephology has generally been accepted that the traditional social ties between voters and parties become weaker and the possibility of swing votes, protest votes and voter abstention increases. But also here it is important to take a closer look. Social classes in Germany have changed markedly since the country became a single entity. They do not exist any longer as fighting political camps, but as traditional lines of different lifestyles they are still evident. Cultural borders and mutual prejudices between social milieus still exist. The individualisation that comes with modernization of society did not dissolve the social layers, but multiplied them. The socio-structural classes have been differentiated even further and formed branches like a family tree. (Vester et al. 2001: 13) “The cultural classes of every day life are [...] right because of their abilities to change and to differentiate extraordinary stable. What erode are the hegemonies of certain parties (and groups of intellectuals) in the socio-political camps. Thus there is not a crisis of social milieus (because of value change) but a crisis of political representation (because of an increasing distance between élites and milieus).” (Vester et al. 2001: 13; author’s translation) There are two points, which are important in the following: Firstly, one can observe processes that weaken voter-party-coalitions postulated from the socio-structural theories. Secondly, there are empirical results that new social groups, based upon shared lifestyles and value orientation, emerge besides traditional classes and camps.

Unfortunately, a confusing abundance of different terms prevails in psephology, for instance socio-structural classes, political camps or social milieus. In case of their adoption it often remains unclear whether they include a different meaning too. I align myself with the following distinction: on a social level *interest-based* socio-structural classes and *value-based* social milieus exist. Both types have the potential – if mobilized – to aspire the representation of their specific norms within the political system. This representation can be accorded by parties, whereby voter-party-voter coalitions or political camps are constituted. The different lifestyles and value orientation, which

are marked in social milieus, can cause the desire to form a corresponding policy which like the interests, is organized -along the lines of social class. In both cases the parties are offering the citizens certain policy contents for representing their demands in the political system. Thus the coherent interaction between supply and demand can cause voter-party-coalitions. According to Ronald Inglehart's (1977) thesis, the value change in the 1970s and 1980s led to a new cleavage within Western societies: between a materialistic value-orientation, characterized by striving for security and material supply, and post-materialistic value-orientation, corresponding with the wish for respect and self-realization. The Green Party could establish permanency, because it offered a political home for the post-materialistic values, mobilized in the peace and ecology movement.

Within the integrative explanation model I introduce the domain "value orientation/lifestyle" as a necessary supplement to socio-structural interests. Figure 1 illustrates the reformulated sociological themes. I would also call for a new understanding of voter-party-coalitions: not any longer as stiff, essentially changeable structures, but as coalitions that form based on a certain policy demand, meeting an adequate policy supply. Voter-party-coalitions are joined and are abolished, with different social groups increasingly selective and specific to situation and topic. Coalitions in this sense are strategic alliances, depending on circumstances and people, in the individual struggle for existence on the different social determined arenas. Whereas no socio-structural group-interests or value-orientations have become arbitrarily, but their political representation! The frozen voter-party-coalitions are loosened and now have to be mobilized increasingly by topics and situations. For example, during the election

Figure 2:



campaign in 1998 it was useful for the SPD, to appeal to the “Neue Mitte”³⁹, to induce union-aligned voters to elect SPD, in contrast to the election campaign of 2005, which stressed the difference between the two important political camps.⁴⁰

With this reformulation no achievements of the sociological explanation models were given up. Both, firm socio-structural voter-party-coalitions as well as coalitions, joined topic and situation specific, are explainable. The quality, quantity and stability of the cleavages depend on the voters’ policy demand and the parties’ policy supply. Combined, this can lead to strong cross pressure as well as to firm party commitment. The question of de-alignment or realignment is not decided; both developments stay explainable within the presented model. I want to stress once more the necessity of mobilization along the cleavages. Social conflicts are not bare theoretical constructs, but political tensions between social groups, which have been significant for a long time. Therefore, the underlying conflicts have to be current to a certain extent otherwise they could not have an impact on the voting behaviour. Voter-party-coalitions have to be revitalized from time to time as voters assure themselves about the political intentions of the parties. Especially at very political periods, such as election, voter-party-coalitions are affected by important issues (Pappi 1979: 466 et seq.; Schultze 2003: 74).

Socio-psychological explanation approach: party identification

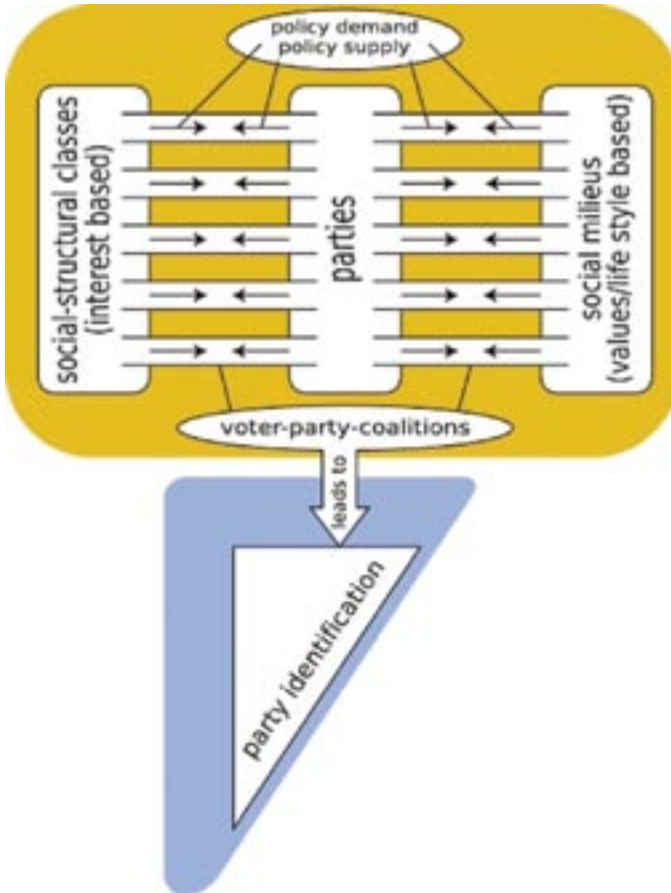
Angus Campell and his colleagues formulated the socio-psychological explanation approach in the 1950s. Despite or perhaps because of the discussions about the transferability of the US-American Ann Arbor Model, it developed into one of the most prominent theories of the empirical election research outside the USA.⁴¹ The decision process at an election is described as a “funnel of causality”; at its exit is the voting decision. The short-term influences, such as preferences for candidates, parties and issues precede this exit directly. Further long-term factors like party identification or social structure are again pre-aged in comparison to the short-term ones. (Campbell et al. 1960: 24-32) The party identification serves as a political reference framework, to order the complex political system. It provides a stable consistency in attitude, whereby due to the short-term factors, a voting decision deviating from the party identification is intended. The different motives are not imparted by objective occurrences, but by individual perception: The identification with a group is more important than the actual group membership. This evaluation shapes the attitude to issues, parties and candidates (Falter – Schumann – Winkler 1990: 8).

³⁹ The SPD directed its election campaign towards centre voters. All voters who did not want to elect for the Union parties, after 16 years in government, should be able to vote for a modern SPD. The according slogan was “advancement and justice” that appealed to the Neue Mitte (New Centre).

⁴⁰ The federal election 2005 was affected by antagonism between SPD and Green party on the one side and CDU/CSU and FDP on the other side. The one camp wanted to stay, the other to be in government.

⁴¹ Cf. for a brief overview about the discussion in Germany with pursuing reference (Wüst 2003: 99 et seq.; Gehring – Winkler 1997, 477).

Figure 2:



The central explanation concept within the socio-psychological approach is party identification. The authors of the Ann Arbor Model defined party identification as fairly long-term, affective embodied connection of a voter to a party, as a psychological identification with a party (Campbell et al. 1960: 121 et seq.). In the scientific reception of the model the concept of the party identification was specified: Socio-structural determinants and value-orientation respective lifestyles consolidate in the course of political socialization and lead across the perception of voter-party-coalitions to different intense affective party identification (Gehring – Winkler 1997: 477; Bretthauer – Horst 2001: 397). Thereby it becomes evident that the modified socio-structural explanation model supplements the socio-psychological approach. The motives, resulting from socio-structural determinates, value orientation and lifestyles feed into the socio-psychological area. Whether the voter, based on his/her specific policy demand, can identify with none, one or more parties, he will develop no party identification, or

a more or less significant. Figure 2 illustrates the different pronounced party identification by the downward decreasing width of the triangle.

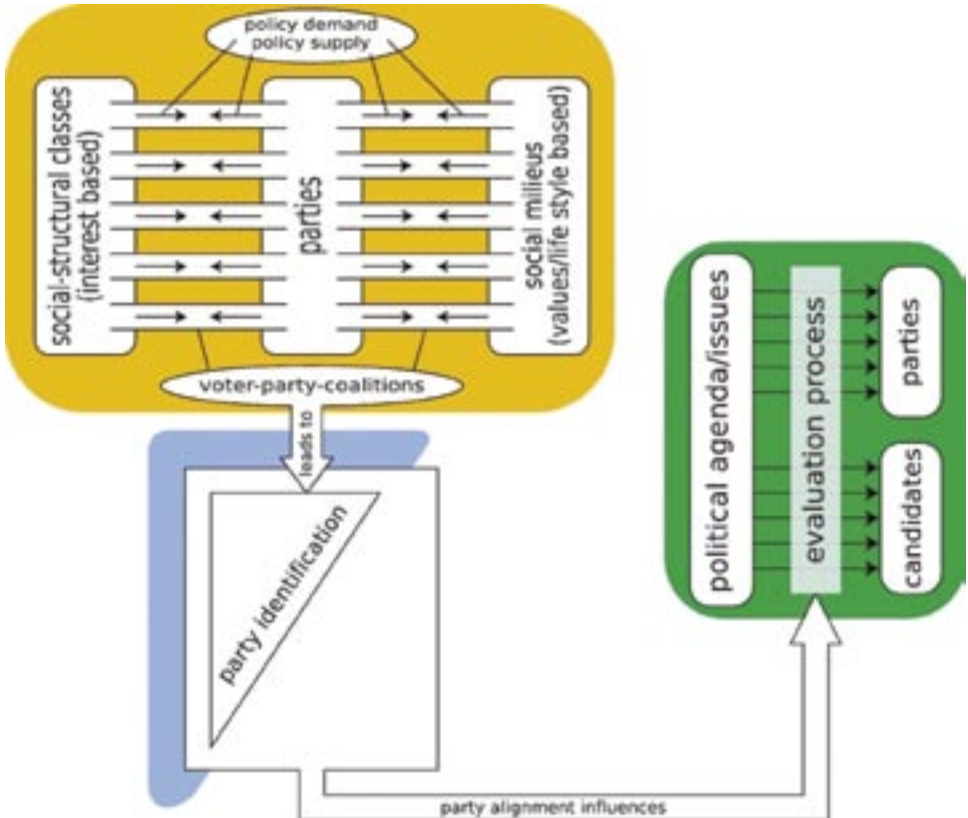
Rational-choice approach

Previously presented motives explain the voting decision on the basis of personal preferences and socio-structural determinants. The rational-choice approach of Anthony Downs, on the other hand, presumes that they go without saying. Moreover, voters and parties are regarded as rational actors, exchanging votes against the implementation of political aims. (Downs 1957: 23) Individuals acting rationally, when they choose in a given situation the alternative from which they can expect the best profit. Situational and political conditions lead the voter to make a voting decision due to its rationality. Citizens have to be able to arrange their desires and requirements and to evaluate the political alternatives according to this preference order (Downs 1957: 6). Correspondingly, the theory is based upon the axiom that if the parties want to win election, they will consider the voter's preferences (Downs 1957: 11-13). The voter evaluates the parties according to their previous performance (retrospective) and their expected governmental performance, were they in power (prospective). Because the voters do have not sufficient information, they make a choice based on uncertainty about the real occurrences. The theory of the rational voter is limited in its explanatory power. The model is not able to explain satisfactorily why due to a large electorate and the almost insignificance of their votes citizens go to vote at all, or why small parties get votes. They virtually have not any influence to governmental output (Arzheimer – Schmitt 2005: 284-293). Down's rational voter is therefore seen as a supplementary rather than as an alternative to the already presented explanation approaches of voting behaviour (Falter – Schumann – Winkler 1990: 13).

In my previous remarks the short-term factors of the Ann Arbor Model missed out the impact of political issues and their influence of party and candidate preferences. Following Morris Fiorina's enhancements of the rational voter and the *New American Voter* by Warren Miller and Merrill Shanks, I understand the evaluation of parties and candidates, intended in the social psychological approach, as a rational vote influenced by uncertainty. There are three criteria, according to the Ann-Arbor model, that have to be fulfilled in order that the political agenda has an impact on the voting behaviour: A voter has to perceive an issue, ascribe importance to the problem and finally associate the answer to the question with a party (Gehring – Winkler 1997: 476). The decisive factor is which competence in problem solving, regarding the respective issues, parties and candidates are being ascribed. The evaluation process results from a prospective and retrospective performance review of parties and candidates (Bretthauer – Horst 2001: 398). Thus, the rational-choice approach unfolds within the Ann-Arbor model: on the one hand by the preference order of the issues and the position of the voter according to these questions, on the other hand by evaluating parties and candidates.

During this decision making process the voter is caught in a dilemma between insufficient information and the high costs of a more comprehensive provision of information. The voting decision becomes a cost-benefit calculation. The voter shifts a bigger part of the costs for selection, analysis and evaluation of information onto his/her social surroundings, interest groups, media, party programmes and so on. In this way the voter is able to limit uncertainty in a rational way (Wüst 2003: 101). Identification with a party also eases the evaluation process. As assumed in the socio-psychological approach and confirmed by empirical studies, voters aligned with a party most likely assign the highest competence in solving political problems to this party. Thus a profiled party identification has an impact on the evaluation of parties and candidates (Schoen – Weins 2005: 212 et seq.). Figure 3 demonstrates the developed integrative model so far. In the dark grey area the rational-choice approach broadens the social psychological model.

Figure 3:



At this point it is worthwhile to ask what opportunities citizens have to understand the highly complex political system in order to make a well-informed decision.

A significant party identification structures the political room in advance to make the opinion of his/her party – if it exists – to an assessment factor. But what works for a voter without party ties? Where does s/he obtain a benchmark to evaluate parties, candidates and their politics? He has no choice than to inform himself or to be informed by others: from personal discussions, newspapers, television, and media in common, in election campaigns; in short: by his/her participation in political communication.

Influence of political communication

From the findings that ever fewer voters have a significant party identification, the area of political communication comes in psephology's field of vision. Herein the agenda-setting approach proves useful, mainly because it is compatible with a plurality of different concepts, complementing each another, e.g. with framing processes (McChombs 2000: 126). In the following section I give a brief sketch of the agenda-setting approach and framing processes.

The core of agenda-setting is that the importance of different news items in the media coverage has influence on the political agenda (McChombs 2000: 123 et seq.). This is based on the assumption that interpersonal communication replaced information transfer in the course of the modernization of society. In contrast to this gained the media coverage more and more relevance for what we know about the world. Besides what the news is about, the nature of the media reports is important: the view we get from the scene, the presentation of the pictures, and the attributes used in the report. All of this has an influence on how we perceive and understand the news. Media coverage has a certain context that is contained within the news. This contextualization has expanded into communication research as the term "framing" (Mc Chombs 2000: 126 et seq.).

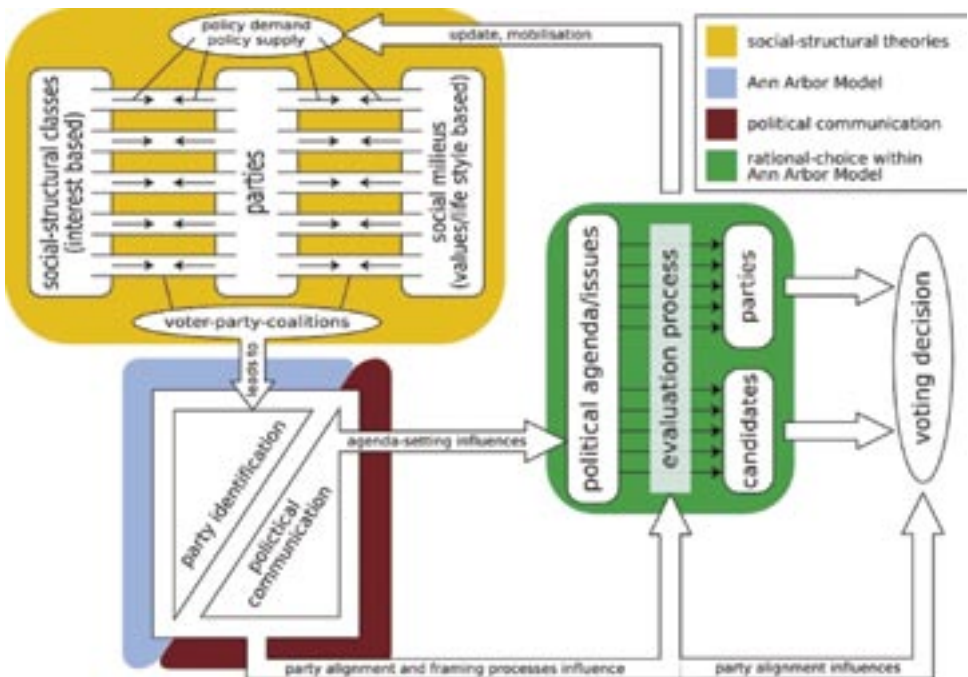
The media agenda and the way the news is produced *can* exert influence on our voting decisions. The stress lies on "can". It is important not to neglect the fact that the news is received by individual processes of news adaptation. Media coverage should be understood rather as an offer for the citizens to align their conceptions with those presented in the media and if applicable to agree with them, partly agree or to reject them. The fact alone that a certain line is being reported – and this is still very frequent and pushing – does not mean that one absorbs this viewpoint uncritically (Schmidt 1994: 15 et seq.). Media coverage is one impact among factors which, considering the time spent on media consumption, is surely part of the individual news adaptation process. But how and with what influence depends on further factors: e.g. personal knowledge and attitudes, the political climate of the social surroundings or the circumstances of the current situation.

With regard to the above we should refer to the findings of empirical studies according to the agenda-setting thesis. In fact, at the aggregated level of media and the public, the significant compliance of the media with the public agenda could be veri-

fied, but in fact the media agenda and the individual agenda correspond only to a very limited extent. Instead, the personal embarrassment of a recipient and that of his/her social surrounding has an influence on the individual topic relevance to a much greater extent. Information from the media influences a complex individual psychological and group dynamic adaptation process. (Rössler 1997: 379-412)

Facing this theoretical imponderability of the impact of political communication on individual voting behaviour, it has to be agreed Otfried Jarren and Ulrich Sarcinelli (1998: 15; author’s translation) that “despite the comparatively high amount of single case studies, even the state of knowledge in the intensively operated election communication is limited because it lacks complex explanation models and comprehensive theoretical concepts that are going beyond highly specialized impact perspectives.” That means for the integrative explanation model that the area of political communication – except the briefly presented impact hypothesis – has to be classified as a black box. However, when facing the increasing importance of media information, we should not surrender to the complex correlations. Further research is necessary to shed light on the dark of the influences of political communication on the voting behaviour.

Figure 4:



Illustrated in figure 4, the impact of political communication is taken into account as follows. On the one hand political communication has an influence on the political agenda, by agenda-setting, and on the other hand on evaluating parties and candidates

through framing processes. The stronger the party is the less significant the party identification of voters is. A profiled party alignment is able to have a direct influence on the voting decision, without a “detour” over the evaluation process about candidates and parties (Schoen – Weins 2005: 198-200).

In conclusion, the model is completed by the aforementioned feature of important issues having the potential to have an impact on voters’ policy demand and the parties’ policy supply, whereby voter-party-coalitions could be revitalized, mobilized or abolished. One could think of the German participation in the NATO deployment in Kosovo. As part of its government responsibility the Green Party agreed to the military intervention in the Balkans and abandoned their unconditional pacifism. Some voters of the Greens lost their party identification and looked for a new political home.

Application of the integrative explanation model

After the integrative model has been completely outlined, it is essential to prove its explanatory power. The single motives of the voting decision, provided in the model, will be presented step by step on the basis of statistical data from the German federal election 2005, finishing with conclusive answer to the questions mentioned in the introduction.

Class structures have had an impact on the voting decisions in this federal election too. For example, an above average proportion of Catholics voted (48 percent) for the Union parties. Thirty-four per cent of people without a religious affiliation gave their vote to SPD, only 31 per cent to CDU/CSU, and to 20 per cent to the SPD. The high proportion of votes cast for the SPD is due to the fact that it is traditionally strong in atheist eastern Germany. Regarding the votes of employees, there is a stand-off between the two people’s parties. The CDU/CSU and SPD gained 34 per cent of votes among these voters. The fact, that just 20 per cent of unemployed persons voted CDU/CSU should be thought provoking for supporters of the Union parties. The election campaign slogan “Putting work first”⁴² apparently did not attract votes in this group. It was possible that jobless people had more fear of drastic reforms than hope for a quick economic recovery and the creation of new jobs by a Union Party-led federal government. This could also explain the success of the Linke PDS in this election group (25 per cent). But again the special situation in the eastern part of Germany has to be taken into account: high unemployment in connection with the strongly rooted left-wing party there (Die Wahl 2005: 15). The fact that the SPD, performing only moderately in the federal government and with social reforms such as Hartz IV, still reached 34 per cent in this voting group may surprise at first sight. But it shows the steady influence of social milieus regardless of short-term factors moving in opposite directions. The best example is the Gelsenkirchen constituency. In this traditional SPD stronghold 53.8 per cent voted for the Social Democrats – the unemployment rate in Gelsenkirchen in 2004 was 19.9 per cent (Bundeswahlleiter 2005). Voter preferences

intensified by social milieus are not inflexible, and this was seen again in the results in Bavaria. The CSU lost disproportionately in that constituency; they gained the best results at the federal election in 2002. And in lower Bavaria (57.3 per cent of second votes; minus 12.5 per cent compared to 2002), as in Upper Palatinate (51.2 per cent; minus 11.9 per cent), many votes were lost (Kießling 2005). Above all, the personnel decisions of the Union parties can serve as a possible reason for this. On the one hand the mobilizing effect of a Bavarian chancellor candidate was extraordinary high in the year 2002. But in the run-up to the election 2005 Stoiber did not want to decide on what to do in the case of an election victory: go to Berlin or stay in Munich. On the other hand, many potential voters of the CSU were sceptical about the entire leadership of the Union parties (Kießling 2005).

Let us deal with another staff decision. Angela Merkel presented her shadow cabinet on 17 August 2005. One of its members was the largely unknown finance expert and former judge of the constitutional court Professor Paul Kirchhof. Initially it seemed that the surprise inclusion had achieved its goal. The media coverage was mainly positive (Media Tenor 2005a), and once more the candidate for Chancellor could prove that she meant the slogan “Give way to employment“ seriously: the tax policy could be subject to this too. But Kirchhof’s radical tax concept of a uniform tax rate of 25 per cent with simultaneous omission of all exceptions had to frighten. Furthermore, affirmations by the Union Parties that they would implement the tax policy this way by the Union parties did not help. In particular, the abolition of the “commuter lump sum“⁴³ and the tax-exempt amounts for shift work and work on public holidays would have meant a tax increase for many employees (Feldenkirchen – Theile 2005: 62). This was the actual point of attack for the SPD, which concentrated largely on the unknown Paul Kirchhof and his opposition to “social injustice”, and the television debate crucially contributed to this image, proved by data from the “Infratest dimap”. Before the television discussion 42 per cent of interviewed people were of the opinion that Union parties pursued a good tax policy and only 28 per cent said the SPD had an adequate tax policy. After the television debate the opinion polls were balanced: CDU/CSU and SPD gained 35 per cent each (Infratest dimap 2005a). But if the election campaign had not been primarily restricted to the topics of employment and the economy, Kirchhof alone would not have had such an impact. As an opposition party, the CDU/CSU benefited largely from the votes from the assumed or actual losers of the reforms of the red-green federal government. Those were borrowed votes, bringing the conservative camp to a high poll position since 2002. The fact that the union parties abandoned committing to these groups permanently or making at least advances to them may have determined the election result (Drieschner 2005: 7) Another problem for the Union parties was that that they could not distinguish themselves as a party for socially weak groups and social equality. In this respect the antagonistic election campaign staged by SPD and Schröder caught on. The policies of the CDU/CSU were perceived as those

⁴² Author’s translation of *Vorfahrt für Arbeit*.

of social indifference, personified by Paul Kirchhof, making it simpler for the Social Democrats to uphold their arguments (Kießling 2005).

This election also shows that media agenda might significantly determine the public agenda, and how the topics are relevant for the individual recipient and what impact they have could be different from the tenor of the media coverage. Roland Schatz, chief editor of the “Media Tenor”, made a forecast based on the analysis of its institute on 16 September: if the media support to CDU/CSU lasts at the last two days before the election the conservative camp will win (Media-Tenor 2005).⁴⁴ Apparently the pictures of parties and candidates in the media differed from the one citizens had in mind. Otherwise the indecisive voters would have followed the media trend and voted for the Union parties.

What explains the large deviations between the last published polls and the election result? Two reasons are possible: either an important number of voters actually made their decision just before the election so that their vote could not be counted by the polling companies, or the poll methods had been in this case faulty. Therefore, the preferences of some voters could not correctly be measured, or not at all. Elisabeth Noelle (2005) assumes the party constellation after the election to the 16th German Bundestag is the result of an opinion formation that has to be fundamentally different from those preceding election. I suspect that a combination of both reasons tipped the scales for the inaccurate election prognoses.

In the run-up to the federal election there were not only many voters who were indecisive right up to the end. They were also in an impossible situation while making their voting decision. Renate Köcher from the *Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach* tellingly described tellingly as a “desponded mood of change” (Spreng 2005). In fact at the beginning of September 70 per cent of interviewed people were disaffected with the work of the red-green government. However, at the same time 50 per cent were sceptical whether a government led by the Union parties would do a better job (Infratest dimap 2005a). It was not surprising that 46 per cent of all voters said that the voting decision was never so difficult in the past. This was mainly because the parties’ political programmes differed greatly from each other – so 51 per cent of the asked ones. Neither the CDU/CSU nor SPD could successfully gain a picture of voter confidence (Infratest dimap 2005b). Also, there had never been so many different governmental coalitions imaginable in the run-up to an election. That makes it difficult for tactical voters. Facing this imponderability a closer look at polling methods could prove instructive. Which results do we get from undecided voters at the opinion polls? To deduce voter intentions, pollsters are looking for statistical “twins” in the data, i.e. those who expressed a voting intention and gave a similar answer to the question in the interview, as with those who did not make a statement regarding their vote. In the scale of statistical accuracy one assumes that undecided voters will decide like their

⁴³ It is a tax-deductible commuting expense for employed people; called “Pendlerpauschale” in German.

statistical “twins” and therefore will be assigned as corresponding (Noelle-Neumann – Petersen 2005: 295). Facing the specific character of that election with all its imponderableness and indecisive voters, one may assume that the assignment of the voting intention through statistical twins was partially misleading this time.

Before examining the plausibility of this answer, let us have a closer look at the voters. Also in this election there was a core of loyal voters with a party identification strong enough to support their party largely independently from the influence of short-term factors. Another part of the electorate possessed a certain party identification, but this was less significant. Situational personal attitudes and the prevailing election campaign issues were able to affect their party identification. These votes have to be mobilized by the parties. If it does not succeed, a vote different from the party identification becomes possible. To carry on this rough classification of voters, there is a third group possessing no significant party identification, above all using short-term impacts for their its decision and showing affinities to Down’s Rational Voter, whereas “rationality” should not be interpreted in a strict way.⁴⁵ The first group of voters is for the plausibility proof uninteresting. They make their voting decision early in favour of their party and that is reflected in the polls. Potentially this is different form the other mentioned voter groups because for their vote short-term impacts were weighing much more. Since the election campaign of the Union parties was not qualified for scooping even approximately the voter potential, the mobilizing impulse for the Union parties was largely missing. That enforces the potential impact of situational circumstances of the election. But they were largely all suitable to distract from the voting intention in favour of the Union parties: one-sided management of the election campaign, little convincing personnel, loss of interpretation sovereignty over important election campaign issues (e.g. tax policy), reservations concerning a large coalition etc. The polling method to align voting intentions by statistical twins works better the more precise are the circumstances in the run-up to an election. For example, with a clear tendency for change, consistent preferences for party and candidate or clear strategic options on possible governmental coalitions. All of that was not evident before this election – the opposite occurred. So this time it was possible that one linked voters without voting tendency to statistical twins that made their voting decision more based on their party identification. In that case there would be – as happened – a preponderance of the CDU/CSU in the polls. For the voters who stayed indecisive to the last, the situational circumstances of the election have been more important. This made a vote for the Union parties improbable and could explain the large change of voters from CDU/CSU to FDP. If the voters without firm election intention possessed a weak identification with the Union, they would want to leave their votes in the conservative camp. The election campaign provided many good reasons for them to elect the FDP instead of the CDU/CSU this time.

⁴⁴ Sure, the conclusion was also based upon the published polls that emerged as defective after the election. That has to be taken into account.

Conclusion

Psephology recognizes a plurality of possible motives for voting behaviour, but without developing their systematic combination. Facing an increasing volatile electorate, long-term motives lose their importance, while short-term factors have more of an impact. That fact has to be taken into account by the theoretical basics of psephology – not only in ad-hoc explanations in post-election interpretations. Therefore, I consider the following steps to be necessary: Firstly, take a revision of the macro-sociological “cleavage theory” and connect its strength in the causal explanation of the prognostic abilities of the micro-sociological model. Secondly, understand the decision logic of the rational-choice approach as an addition to the socio-psychological Ann Arbor Model. Thirdly, consider the influence of political communication on the voting decision more strongly. Particularly the agenda-setting approach and the provision for framing processes have been proved profitable in psephology when the individual relevance of media coverage is taken into account too. Fourthly, combine the different voters’ motives to realize a systematic weighting of the single influence factors. It applies to develop a balanced theory building, acquiring the individual voting behaviour preferably comprehensively. By the example of the election 2005 to the German Bundestag I hope to have clarified that the outlined integrative explanation model can be a contribution to this, what my main thesis would prove.

Nevertheless, someone may have provisos against integrative approaches. Does not the existence of different capable models of the voting behaviour permit psephology to precisely analyse the complex process of voting decision sophisticatedly? Is an integrative approach desirable, even though thereby subtleties of the theories deriving in different science traditions will be lost? The model sketch should clarify that the expressiveness of the single theories persists completely despite the integration. Combining the single election motives systematically provides a further development in our understanding of voting behaviour. An abundance of different explanation approaches is not a criterion of quality. They have to be related meaningfully to each other so that from the bare abundance a profitable variety of theoretical models arises.

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⁴⁵ A mother for example, disappointed from the established parties could vote for the *Familienpartei* (family party), because she *does not* want to give their vote to other parties. Understood, with such a meaning of “rationality” we are outside the application scope of the rational-choice approach. But this is irrelevant for the further analysis.

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