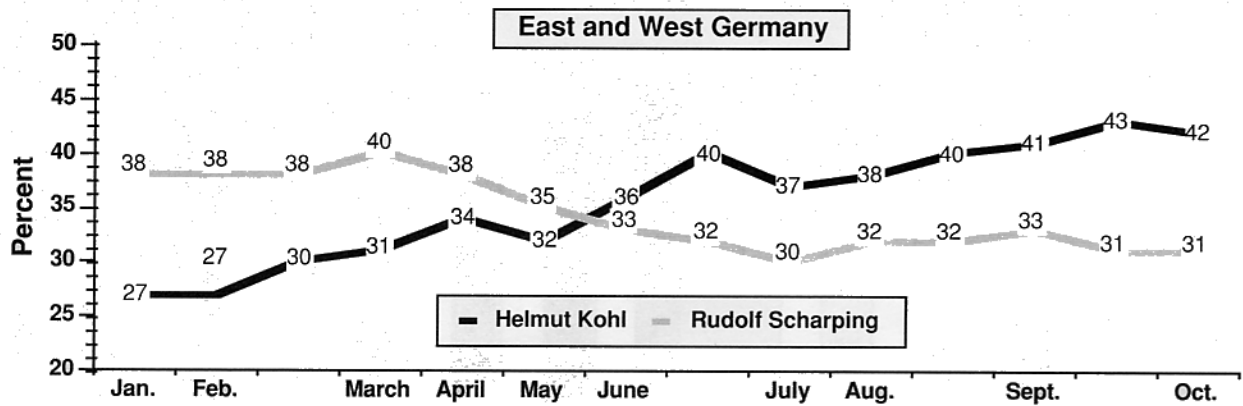


Figure 2
THE 1994 FEDERAL ELECTION: Whom Do You Favor for Chancellor?



Source: Allensbach Archives, IFD-Surveys, 1994.

cal to the election's outcome—since this party, unlike the PDS, would not qualify for seats under the “three-constituency victories” rule. Polls by most research institutes showed the FDP well above the 5% mark, generally in the 7-9% range. But one polling firm, Forsa, announced three weeks prior to the election that only 4% of the population still intended to vote FDP. Forsa's director said on a popular TV program that those voting for the Free Democrats would likely be throwing their votes away. This 4% projection was played up in

the German media. Five leading polling organizations distanced themselves from it, though, decrying any attempt to manipulate the election through opinion research.

The “wasted vote” gambit, supposedly buttressed by poll findings, failed in the end. The fact that most polls showed the FDP over 5% was perhaps decisive. But feelings generated by the polling controversy ran high. After all, if the Free Democrats had not made the 5% cut-off, Rudolf

Scharping would probably be chancellor of Germany.

Endnotes:

- 1 Everett C. Ladd, “The 1992 US National Election,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 1-21.
- 2 See, for example, Kurt Reumann, “Kohls Optimismus steckt die Wähler an—er ist seine stärkste Waffe,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (October 18, 1994), p.3.

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What Part Did the Media Play?

By Wolfgang Donsbach

Some people still question whether the mass media influence elections or not. It's evident that they do. One survey result attests to this: When asked how they get their most important guidance in deciding how to vote, over 80% of the German public mention one or more of the news media, with half mentioning television in particular. Second-hand experience and borrowed opinions become more and more crucial in societies where the public has to make up its mind about an increasing number of complex issues and regarding political leaders with whom it has less and less direct contact.

What was the thrust of the German news media in the 1994 Bundestag election on

October 16? There are four lessons to be learned: (1) the partisan press system prevailed; (2) the challenger, Rudolf Scharping, lost the election, in part, because his supporters in the media endorsed him only halfheartedly; (3) negativism dominated political coverage; and (4) the media battle about the fate of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) was the most crucial element in this campaign.

The German *Medien Monitor*

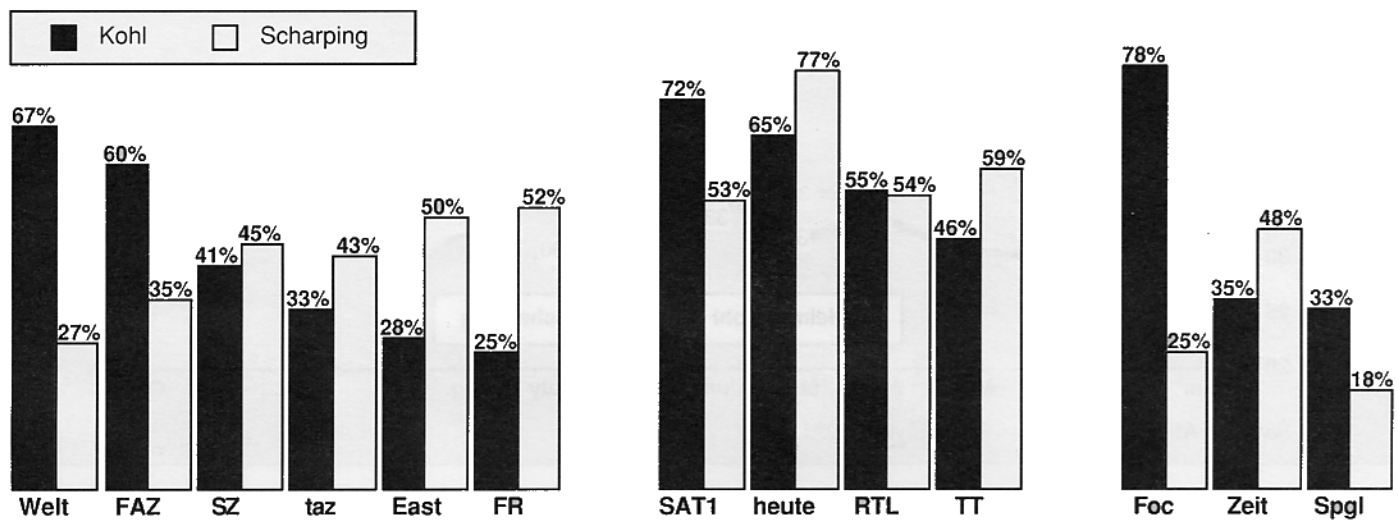
For the first time in a German election we are able to rely on empirical data—in this instance, provided by the German *Medien Monitor*. Inspired by the US *Media*

Monitor, a group of scholars, business people, and other public figures founded an association for media content analysis in late 1993. Published twice a month, the *Medien Monitor* contains the results of quantitative content analyses of some 15 German news media of national significance. The coding covers several regular subjects (news coverage of the leading political figures and parties, the state of the economy, the main issues in the news), and, in addition, includes various topical issues popping up in the media and selected every two weeks by the research committee.

The news media on which the *Medien Monitor's* analyses are based have been

Figure 1

**Media References to the Two Major Contenders:
Percentage Positive by News Organization**



KEY: Daily Newspapers: Welt=*Die Welt*; FAZ=*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*; SZ=*Süddeutsche Zeitung*; taz=*Die Tageszeitung*; East=3 East German dailies; FR=*Frankfurter Rundschau*. TV: SAT1=SAT1 news; heute=ZDF journal; RTL=RTL news; TT=ARD Tagesthemem. Weekly News Magazines: Foc=*Focus*; Zeit=*Die Zeit*, Spgl=*Der Spiegel*.

Note: For these media, 1,962 references to Kohl or Scharping were coded as either "positive" or "negative". The proportion of those which were "positive" are shown in this graph. **Source:** German *Medien Monitor*.

selected for their relevance in the German media and political systems. They comprise seven dailies (including three from eastern Germany), six weekly papers and news magazines, and the four main television news programs (two public and two private). Codebooks have been developed and are constantly revised by a staff of researchers, including the author of this article. The actual coding is done by students who are especially trained for this task. The accuracy of the instrument is regularly checked by means of statistical validity tests.

Clear Alignments with Candidates

German news media, like many others in Europe, are known for taking a clearer editorial stance toward political topics than US media, with their long-standing tradition of fairness, balance and neutrality. Through content analysis, the German press are consistently shown to have alignment with the different political camps.¹ Unlike US media, which display their political endorsements of candidates mainly in their editorials, German news media tend to select and emphasize information throughout

their publications which support their editorial viewpoint.²

This pattern prevailed in the coverage of the incumbent and his challenger before the 1994 Bundestag election. In our content analysis we coded favorable and unfavorable statements or assertions about Helmut Kohl and Rudolf Scharping in news articles and television news stories.³ From the end of July until October 5, less than two weeks before election day, the leading German news media had published almost 2,000 such statements with a distinct positive or negative slant towards one of the candidates. Of the 13 news media included in this analysis, six published more favorable statements on Kohl than on Scharping, seven had more favorable statements on Scharping than on Kohl.

The pattern shown in Figure 1 reproduces in an almost linear way the political spectrum of the four main national dailies (from right to left: *Die Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and *Frankfurter Rundschau*). In the three eastern German dailies, Kohl was portrayed particularly negatively. On the other side,

in addition to the two conservative dailies, he had his main support among the editors of the news magazine *Focus* and the commercial television station Sat1.

Scharping Weakened by His Own Supporters

Although there were more news media that favored Scharping than vice versa, overall Kohl was mentioned more often with favorable terms than Scharping: 46% compared to 40%! This is due to the fact that those news media endorsing the challenger did so only half-heartedly. Even the more left-leaning media, such as the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, the *Tageszeitung*, or the weekly *Die Zeit*, did not give him a clear advantage over Kohl. Their coverage thus differed significantly from those news organizations that favored Kohl, which did so in a pronounced, one-sided manner. In other words, Scharping did not receive the same media thrust from "his" media as did Kohl from the more conservative press. The influential news magazine *Der Spiegel*, known to be rather left-leaning and anti-Kohl, even published more favorable statements about Kohl than about his challenger.

This leads to the conclusion that the SPD lost the election, to some extent, due to a lack of support among its own supporters. Had this part of the German press displayed a bias as strong as the conservative media, the outcome might have been different.

Negativism of the Press

The overall tendency of a majority of the news media to portray the two candidates with more negative than positive statements and evaluations corresponds with the findings of content analysis conducted in the US by Clancey and Robinson, as well as Patterson.⁴ These results indicate a general pattern of the news media toward negativism in the coverage of political figures, particularly those who run for major offices. In the German election, only three of the thirteen news media studied made an exception by supplying their audience with more positive than negative statements on **both** candidates. (All three of these, interestingly, were television stations.) Here, as in many other modern democracies, it becomes more and more a quasi-professional standard to treat only the bad news as newsworthy. As Patterson has shown with his time-series analysis, this high degree of negativism can affect the public's attitudes toward political figures and thus, in the long-run, might jeopardize basic support of a democratic system.

Another finding of our content analysis parallels results of campaign research in the US: The majority of news coverage of both candidates related to their personal or political characteristics rather than their standing on issues. From early August through October 6, only one in two statements on Kohl and merely 42% of the comments regarding Scharping were issue-related. Information on and evaluations of their personalities seemed to be of a greater news-worthiness to the press.

The Battle Over the Fate of the FDP

For those not familiar with the German party system, a continuation of the ruling conservative-FDP coalition led by Helmut Kohl and foreign minister Klaus Kinkel was only possible if Kinkel's Free Democrats received a minimum of 5% of the

overall party vote. The so-called "5%-hurdle," designed to prevent a multi-party system with many small factions, was the crucial margin for the FDP to overcome in order to stay in parliament and, as a result, in Kohl's governing coalition. Anyone who did not want this government to continue knew that a failure of the FDP to jump over this hurdle was the easiest way to win the election.

The results of our content analysis reflect this situation. Until mid-September, the attention given to the FDP corresponded more or less with the party's size and equaled the attention given to the Green Party and the former communist party (PDS). In the last weeks before election day, the FDP became the major issue of all party politics. During this period the German press covered and evaluated this small party more than any of the other parties.

The media battle over the fate of the Free Democratic Party was evident in statements about its chances to make it into parliament. In mid-September, 43% of all predictions in the news media asserted that the party would make it into parliament, 28% predicted its defeat, while the rest saw the question undetermined. Two weeks later the situation had changed to a much more polarized picture. The proportion of favorable and unfavorable predictions had both increased, the former to 47%, the latter to 34%. By this time, only one-fifth of news reports claimed that it was still a toss-up whether the FDP would make it into the Bundestag or not. Not surprisingly, left-leaning journalists were most inclined to paint the more pessimistic picture. Forty-three percent of their statements held that the FDP would not gain the crucial margin; only 7% said that it would.

In the last period of our analysis, the majority of the polls began to show a rather safe return to parliament for the Free Democrats. It was only at this point that most journalists shifted their forecasts. However, even after the polling evidence weighed in heavily on the side of the FDP, 10% of journalists still predicted an FDP defeat, and 43% continued to claim that there was an equal chance that the party would or would not pass the hurdle.

More Evidence Still to Come

The German *Medien Monitor* offers a great treasure of empirical data on the German news media. A more thorough analysis of these data, including data on the last ten days before the election, will give a still clearer picture. If we accept that the media thrust on public opinion is a decisive factor in the electoral process, the German news media have influenced the voters' decisions in two ways. First, the challenger did not get the support he could expect from "his side" of a rather partisan national press. Second, the campaign (initiated by the political left and publicized by the news media) to discourage potential voters of the Free Democratic Party by suggesting a wasted ballot, failed in the end. Although in both western and eastern Germany the proportion of voters who believed the FDP would make it into parliament dropped considerably, the counter evidence, particularly that which was published in the last days before the election and supported by the polls, was sufficient to encourage enough citizens to cast their vote for the FDP and thus help the Kohl-Kinkel coalition stay in power.

Endnotes:

¹ Hans Mathias Kepplinger, *Die Aktuelle Berichterstattung des Horfunks* (Freiburg/München, 1985), pp. 22f.

² Hans Mathias Kepplinger, "Instrumentelle Aktualisierung Grundlagen einer Theorie publizistischer Konflikte," in Max Kaase & Winfried Schultz, eds., *Massenkommunikation: Theorien, Methoden, Befunde, Opladen*, pp. 199-220.

³ A statement was coded as favorable when the politician (or his actions) was described in positive terms, his activities related to success, or when the story attributed positive traits to him. A statement was coded as unfavorable when the politician (or his actions) was described in negative terms, when his activities were related to failures or blunders, when he was criticized or when negative traits were attributed to him.

⁴ Maura Clancey and Michael Robinson, "The Media in Campaign '84: General Election Coverage, Part I," *Public Opinion*, Vol. 7 (Dec/Jan 1985); Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

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