

**Lessons Learned from Obama?
The Effect of Individual Use of Party Websites on Voting in the
Elections to the European Parliament 2009 in Germany.**

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Abstract

Barack Obama's seminal presidential campaign was not the first signal for German parties to use the web more intensively for their communication strategy. Content analyses have shown that German parties make use of online communication to mobilise old and gain new voters differently, in terms of unequal grades of mobilising, informing, interacting or participating features on their party websites. But does the use of those contents have any significant impact on voting? This research question was answered using individual-level data of a representative telephone survey in Germany (n=809). Therefore, the author proposed a multivariate regression model of voting behaviour, which combined widely explored sociological and social psychological factors considering a potential impact of political communication (online) variables – including the visit of party websites. Although voting behaviour was primarily influenced by variables such as party identification and issue- or left-right-orientation, there is some evidence that the visit of party websites could have a positive effect on evaluating the „Bündnis90/Die Grünen“ (Green Party) in relation to political issues. This presents a small indirect positive effect to vote in favour for the Greens, which could be caused by a higher proportion of mobilising features and attacks on political competitors on their party website. Another reason could be that Green voters visited the website of the party they voted for more often and therefore more selectively than other voters the respective websites.

Introduction

The overwhelming victory of Barack Obama in the U.S. Presidential Elections 2008 was often explained with his innovative and mobilising online campaign (Fraser and Dutta 2008; Ord 2008). As consequence, the social-democratic media expert Marc Jan Eumann even stated before the German *Bundestagswahl* (Federal Election) that parties may not win but could lose elections on the Internet (Deutschlandradio Kultur 2009). The task of academic research is to translate such unproven statements into research questions and to work on a valid answer to them.

The argument referred implicitly to the effect of parties' "web campaigning" (Foot and Schneider 2006, 4) on voting behaviour, as communicated through party or politicians' websites. Since the beginning of the millennium, German parties have been including online communication within their campaign strategies in a significant way (Bilgeri, Lamatsch, and Siedschlag 2002). Although it is an important type, there are also other modes of individual political communication on the Net. A useful definition of political communication (online) was formulated by Emmer (2005), comprising informational, interpersonal and participational communication. Positing an increasing importance of the Net for political communication and possible implications for the voting behaviour, following research question is formulated:

RQ: What is the effect of political communication online – and the specific one of the use of party and politicians' websites – on voting behaviour?

This question will be answered in the context of the election to the European Parliament 2009 in Germany.

Research on Voting Behaviour and the Elections to the European Parliament

Research interested in finding out predictors of individual voting behaviour is mainly discussed within the sociological and the social psychological paradigms. While Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet ([1944] 1969) explained voting behaviour with the social affiliation to groups, Campbell et al. (1960) argued that voting decision is based on long- and short-term political attitudes. Recent German literature about voting behaviour has been following the two conceptual streams. Studies found out that confession, socio-economic status, age or education had significant impact on voting for one of the most important political parties in Germany, namely "CDU/CSU" (Christian Democratic (Social) Union, center-right), "SPD" (Social Democratic Party, center-left), "FDP" (Free Democratic Party, center-liberal), "Bündnis90/Die Grünen"

(left-liberal) and “Die Linke” (left) (cf. Jagodzinski and Quandt 2000; Kornelius and Roth 2005; Lachat 2007; Schmitt-Beck 2000; Weßels 2007).

Most studies in the field of voting research are based on the social psychological approach (Schulz 2008). They showed a predominant influence of the party identification on voting. This predictor consists in a long-term psychological linkage to a party (Campbell et al. 1960). On the other side, the effect of short-term political attitudes, such as from the assessment of political candidates or issues, was identified regularly as well (cf. Brettschneider 2002a; Falter, Schoen, and Caballero 2000; Schmitt 1994; Schmitt-Beck 2000; Weßels 2007). Furthermore, political ideology and the assessment of the economic situation were identified as having effects on voting behaviour (cf. Kellermann and Rattinger 2007; Neller and Thaidigsmann 2007; Schmitt 1994; Schmitt-Beck 2000).

As Reif and Schmitt (1980, 8) stated, the elections to the European Parliament highly depend on the national elections; thus they introduced the denomination “second-order-election”. This is the reason why the afore mentioned empirical findings referring to the German Federal Election may be transferred to the European electoral context in Germany.

Elections to the European Parliament face the problem of lacking participation; voting turnout is much lower than in German Federal Elections (Schultze 2009). The observation that media coverage about elections to the European Parliament is lower than before the Federal Election is probably one of the causes why many citizens do not participate in the election (Wilke and Reinemann 2005).

Political Communication Online

Definition and Delimitation

According to Schoen and Weins (2005), the social psychological explanation of voting behaviour is based on the assumption that interpersonal and mass-mediated communication gives information to people to evaluate politics and political actors. Nevertheless, voting research widely excludes individual communication from its explanations (Brettschneider 2005). Communication research thoroughly offers linkages, permitting to theoretically derive assumptions of communication effects, with special focus on online-transmitted communication about politics.

Political communication is therefore defined as communication exercised or received from political actors or which refers to their behaviour and cognitions, being realised mainly mass-mediated or interpersonally (Schulz 2008, 16, translated by the author; Negrine and Stanyer 2007, 1).¹ The mass-mediated communication includes

¹ Participation communication was excluded from the theoretical discussion and was only integrated in the empirical part as an explorative dimension (Emmer 2005). This decision is caused by the fact that

i.e. the use of newspapers or watching news on television. Political discussions with colleagues or friends are exemplary for interpersonal communication.

Political communication online can be distinguished from the traditional way described above by a different channel for transmitting its messages: the Internet (Emmer 2005). However, both relevant dimensions of traditional political communication can be applied to online communication activities dealing with politics.

Web Campaigning

Although parties' relative spending varies from 1 to 5% of their total campaign budgets, German party managers consider online communication as the second most important campaigning channel (Gibson, Römmele, and Ward 2003; Schweitzer 2003). This strategic prioritisation could have been caused by online campaigns during the U.S. Presidential Elections 2000, where Republicans and Democrats made use of all technological possibilities of the relatively "new medium" (Gellner and Strohmeier 2002). The reasons for parties' engagements online can be differentiated in two strategic levels. On the first, uni-directional, level, parties want to inform voters and the media, and mobilise, especially younger voters (Gibson, Ward, and Lusoli 2002). Further, on a participating level, parties use the net to do their organisational work more efficiently, to gain donations, and to mobilise supporters (Gibson, Ward, and Lusoli 2002; Kepplinger and Podschuweit n.d.).

Research about the features, singularities and discrepancies of party communication on the Net is widely focused on a descriptive and often multinational level (cf. Gibson 2004; Gibson, Nixon and Ward 2003; Jankowski et al. 2005; Kluver et al. 2007; Saleh 2005; Schweitzer 2010a; Ward et al. 2008). German content analyses in the past strongly focused on describing functional characteristics of party websites implicitly taking into account parties' communicative strategies.

Herein, Schweitzer (2003; 2008a; 2008b; 2010b) had the most substantial contribution. She conducted long-term content and structural analyses of German party websites during electoral campaigns on European, national and state level from 2002 to 2009. Considering the chronological proximity of the election to the European Parliament (June, 7th) and the German Federal Election (September, 27th) 2009, the last available analysis of party websites to the latter election can be used as an appropriate indicator for deductions for the contents of the European election (Schweitzer 2010b). When comparing the websites of the different parties according to four main features (consisting in 78 elements), interesting discrepancies were visible (Schweitzer 2010b,

participative activities are observed among German population just on a very low level and because communication research literature mainly focuses on both already mentioned dimensions of political communication (i.e. Schmitt-Beck 2000; Schulz and Blumler 1994).

214-215; Fig. 1).² A conspicuous finding was that the Linke offered information (0,91) and presentation (0,84) attributes on their website in a remarkable way, while the major parties (the CDU/CSU and the SPD) reached average scores. More than other parties, the FDP (0,8) and the Bündnis90/Die Grünen (GRE: 0,8) highlighted mobilisation features. Participation characteristics were more often provided by the FDP (0,59) and the CDU/CSU (approx. 0,54). Further findings show that more than emphasising its own strengths, especially websites of the minor parties (FDP, Bündnis90/Die Grünen, Die Linke) focussed on attacking the political opponent (Schweitzer 2010b, 229).

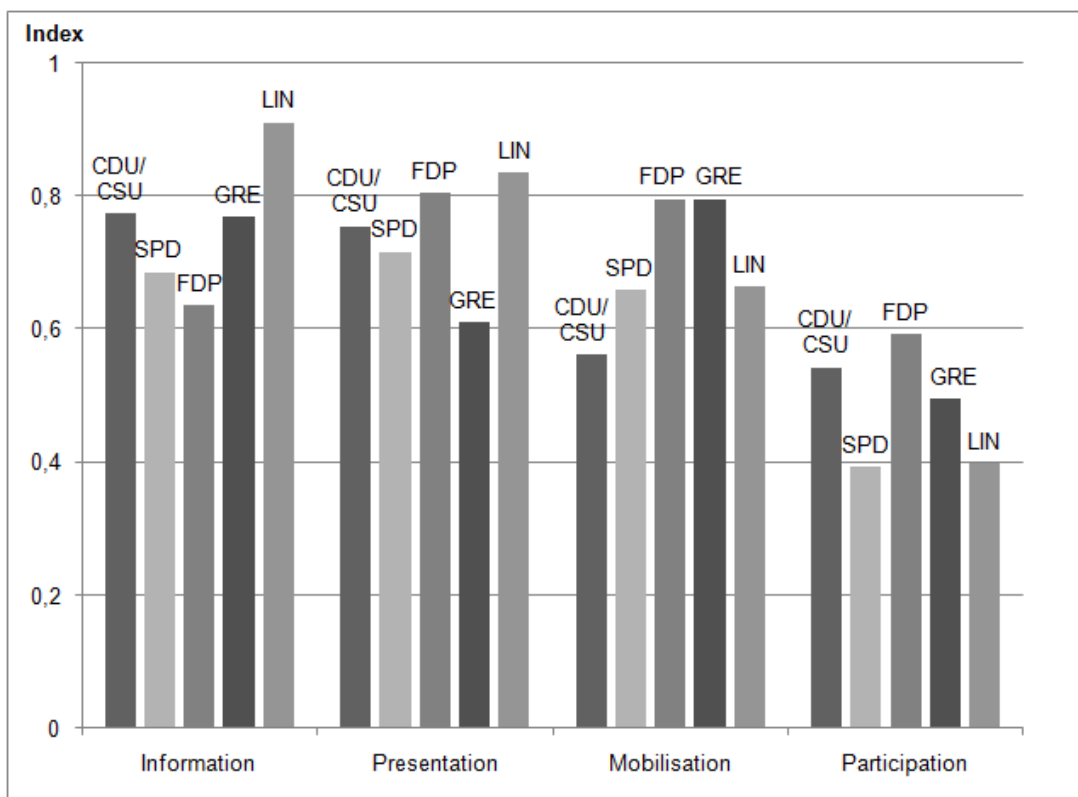


Figure 1: Features of Party Websites at the German Federal Election 2009 (Schweitzer 2010b, 215)

Information characteristics include i.e. offering campaign information about parties' structures, leading characters or positions on issues. Presentative features refer

² Values in Figure 1 are indexes ranging from 0 "no elements of a feature presented" to 1 "all possible elements of features presented" (Schweitzer 2010b, 206-207). Due to the ideological congruency between the CDU and the CSU, their independently measured values were added and averaged together.

i.e. to the visible technological sophistication of the websites, as the grade of multimediality or navigational options. Participative features consist i.e. in the possibility to contact politicians, or offering platforms for political discussion. Features offering the option to acquire new supporters or donations were exemplary mobilising aspects (Schweitzer 2010b, 243-244; for similar categorisations see Foot and Schneider 2006; Gibson et al. 2003; Ward, Gibson, and Lusoli 2003).

While a study of Greer and LaPointe (2004, 127), which focused on early developments of the characteristics of political websites showed a constant increase of nearly all features, Schweitzer (2010b, 212) concludes in her analysis that some characteristics reached contentual thresholds as the important parties early demonstrated a notable amount of informational and mobilisational qualities. She also found a remarkable boost of participating and presenting features which is explained with an increased integration of “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly 2005) applications on party websites, where especially participating contents and platforms were developed (Schweitzer 2010b, 212; Stanoevska-Slabeva 2008). Such contents got foremost politically visible through Howard Dean’s web campaign in the year 2004 but more significantly through Barack Obama’s two years ago (Kaid 2009). Its volunteer recruiting, relationship building and video information efforts reached a remarkable amount of (potential) voters (Fraser and Dutta 2008; Ord 2008).

Although the visits of party websites increase during campaign periods, according to estimated aggregate data, the amount of its users is much lower than i.e. the amount of people who visited online news sites before the Federal Election 2009 – which limits a possible impact on voting (Kepplinger and Podschuweit n.d., 8; Saleh 2005). On the other side, recent German panel data has shown that the proportion of people who visited politicians’ websites within the last years has increased (Emmer, Vowe, and Wolling 2010).

Other Types of Political Communication Online

Further relevant forms of informational communication about politics on the Net include using online news sites, searching for political information online, using weblogs, Wikipedia, social networks, video-sharing websites, podcasts or videocasts for political information, including both Web “1.0” and “2.0” contents.

The importance and possible impact of these forms of political information is not clear. Kolo and Meyer-Lucht (2007, 517-518) observed an average yearly decrease of -0,6% of intensive newspaper readers within 2001 to 2006, whereas the proportion of intensive users of online news sites increased in the same period by about 1% yearly. Emmer, Vowe and Wolling’s (2010) study supports these opposing developments on individual level tendentially. But on the other side, other studies indicate that information gained through online communication has to be assessed still as subordinate (Lusoli 2005; van Eimeren and Frees 2009).

Interpersonal political communication online is manifested in discussions on chats, forums or newsgroups or when contacting politicians directly (Emmer 2005, 126-127). Based on newer representative data, just about 6% of German internet users followed latter activity, whereas approximately 36% of them talked online about politics (Emmer 2005, 98, 127). Interpersonal communication online about politics has been increasing in Germany in the last years (Emmer and Wolling 2009).

It is obvious that political communication online is not practiced by all individuals in a similar way. Studies found out that some individual factors influence those activities positively, including a low age, sex (male), and a high education, political interest or income (cf. Emmer, Fütting, and Vowe 2006; Johnson and Kaye 2003; Norris 2003; Schmidt, Paetzolt, and Wilbers 2006).

Political Communication (Online) Effects on Voting Behaviour

Direct Effects of Traditional Political Communication

Long-term party identification traditionally exerts a big influence on voting behaviour, but might lose a bit of its impact considering a decreasing partisan dealignment (Dalton 1996; Lachat 2007). In relation to this observation, empirical findings illustrated that the short-term political attitudes may gain importance (Ohr 2000; Schmitt 1994). Referring to the social psychological concept, Campbell et al. (1960) did not answer *how* these attitudinal components were generated. Adam (2002) and Brettschneider (2002b) answered this question connecting the social psychological approach with the assumption of media effects in order that an important part of the informational communication is integrated. Such an extended model could be visualised as in Figure 2.

The model states that media coverage about politics is based mainly on political issues. Further, exposure to media contents occurs selectively (Cotton 1985; Festinger 1957). In the underlying example, individuals will rather use those contents not contradicting their party identification. But this filter of selectivity can be “bypassed” if media coverage is negative and/or consonant as well (Adam 2002, 22, 63; Donsbach 1991, 208; Noelle-Neumann 1973, 36-37). If individuals have no party identification, they expose to media non-selectively.

The media effect in this model consists in the “Public Agenda-Setting” (Rössler 1997, 31), which states an impact of media’s issue salience on the peoples’ importance of these issues (McCombs and Shaw 1972; see Kepplinger et al. 1989 for empirical evidence in Germany). Further, media coverage about political issues have an impact on the attribution (Second-Level Agenda Setting) and, more important, on the evaluation of political actors (Priming) (cf. Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; McCombs et al. 1997).

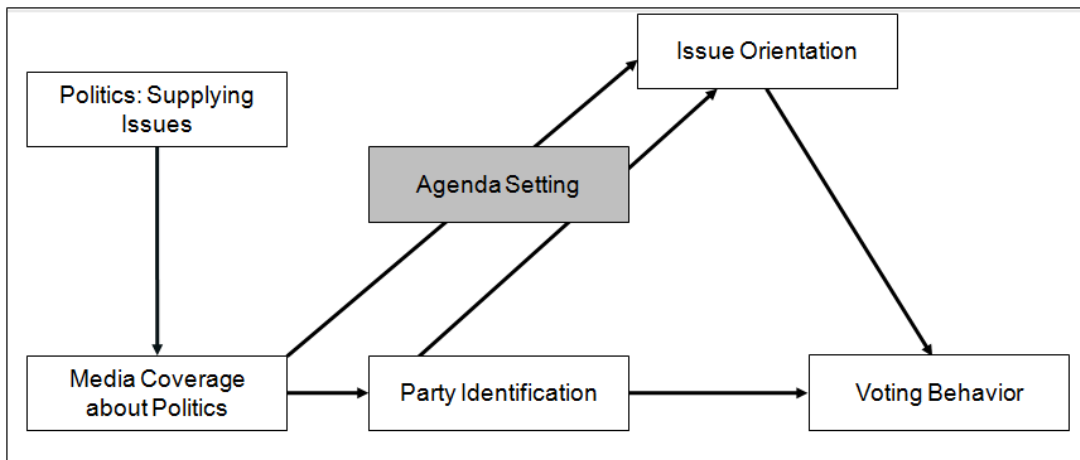


Figure 2: Extended Social Psychological Explanatory Model of Voting Behaviour according to Adam (2002, 60) and Brettschneider (2002b, 66)

According to Zaller (1992, 48), an attitude is the average of instantly available orientations. By influencing individuals' salience of certain political issues or evaluation criteria of political actors, media coverage accentuates their availability. For this reason, media have (at least) a short-term effect on the attitude-building assessment of political issues. Hence, media effects are effects on attitudes in this model. They have the ability to activate latent and reinforce existing political attitudes, and furthermore, to convert them. (Brettschneider 2002b, 59-60). Brettschneider (2005) states, that agenda setting und priming are the most considerable media effects on voting. In the underlying model media effects constitute an impact on the issue orientation, which on its own, effects voting behaviour indirectly.

The original social psychological model also integrated the evaluation of candidates, the so called candidate orientation, which was not included in this proposed extension of the model (Campbell et al. 1960). This decision seemed feasible as this study focuses on the elections to the European Parliament. German politicians running for it were widely unknown among the German population, a circumstance that would have made it difficult to evaluate them (Niedermayer 2005).

Further, Schenk and Rössler (1994) found out that political discussion does not serve to gain information primarily. It can rather be interpreted as follow-up communication, which picks up issues considered as individually important. Hence, agenda setting effects can be positively driven by interpersonal communication and possess an indirect effect on voting behaviour as well (Rössler 1999).

The above mentioned effect of "free media" (Schmitt-Beck and Pfetsch 1994, 111-112) can be contrasted with parties' traditional campaign communication via "paid media". But its effect remains unclear (Holtz-Bacha 2002). As people assume that it has persuading objectives, it can provoke reactant behaviour towards it

(Podschuweit 2007). Therefore, i.e. it can be expected that effects of watching televised campaign ads would rather be limited to those people whose political attitudes are consonant with the messages shown in these ads. The media effect would be an activation or reinforcement of latent or existing political attitudes (Esser, Holtz-Bacha, and Lessinger 2005; Schulz 2008). On the other hand, a conversion of political attitudes is unlikely to happen.

Trying to find out media effects on voting, it should be considered that such an effort can be a challenge within a European electoral context. If media coverage does not reach a substantial size within the regarded campaign period, it could be deduced that media use and therefore media effects may be limited (Wilke and Reinemann 2005). Nevertheless, trying to explain voting behaviour, also considering communicative variables, states an empirical contribution and a theoretical innovation.

Direct Effects of Traditional Political Communication

As Schmitt-Beck (2000) showed, political discussion may not only have an indirect, media-driven effect on voting behaviour, but a direct one as well. This is presumably an activation or reinforcement of latent or existing political attitudes. This assumption can be caused by “Homophily” (Katz and Lazarsfeld [1955] 1962). According to this theory, people mainly talk about politics with politically like-minded others (Schenk and Rössler 1994; Schmitt-Beck 2000). The knowledge about the voting intention of dialogue partners is significantly related to an individual’s voting behaviour, implying an adaptive behaviour (Yum and Kendall 1995). Considering these premises, interpersonal communication has a direct effect on voting behaviour.

Assumptions of Effects of Political Communication Online

Discovering the effect of political communication online on voting behaviour has hardly ever been a scientific subject so far. Whenever online communication is studied in the context of elections, it is rather generally operationalised and often used in surveys as a mere internet use, vague, attitudinal variable (i.e. trust in the Internet) or as a treatment in experimental studies (i.e. Johnson and Kaye 2003; Kaid 2003; Kaid and Postelnicu 2005; Saeki 2005).

However, some empirical insights have been helpful, especially the discussion about the similarities and differences of issue agendas of “onliners” and “offliners”. On the one hand, studies showed that online news media users are less receptive for agenda setting than users of printed news media and partially possess a different political issue agenda (Althaus and Tewksbury 2002; Schönbach, de Waal, and Lauf 2005; Tewksbury and Althaus 2000). These findings did not remain uncontradicted empirically (d’Haenens, Jankowski, and Heuvelman 2004). Emmer and Wolling (2007) hardly found differences in the issue agenda, comparing German onliners and offliners based on representative data. Therefore, it does not seem wrong to assume

that agenda setting effects occur independently of the channel of transmission of media stimuli. Consequently and additionally to the before mentioned insights, following assumption is derived:

1. *The reception of journalistic contents online may cause agenda setting and priming effects*, which can activate latent political attitudes or reinforce existing ones. Furthermore, it could cause a conversion of political attitudes and have an indirect effect on voting behaviour.

It should be noted that these were plausible general effects without assuming any direction. Such effects may be expected primarily when using online news sites as they are mainly supplied by newspapers or news magazines (BITKOM 2009). Such contents can also be found i.e. in weblogs, as they often directly link to online contents of mass-mediated origin (Schmidt, Frees, and Fisch 2009). But these were hardly used for political purposes (Bräuer, Seifert, and Wolling 2008).

Out of the findings referring to the moderating relationship between traditional interpersonal communication and agenda setting effects, a second assumption is formulated:

2. *Interpersonal communication online can occur as follow-up communication due to an agenda setting* of the mass media, activating or reinforcing latent or existing political attitudes or even convert them. Hence, similar to the exposure to mass-mediated communication online, interpersonal communication online could have an indirect effect on voting behaviour.

With regard to the findings about the effects of traditional paid media, a third assumption is derived:

3. *The exposure to partisan or partisan-friendly online contents is selective* and may activate or reinforce latent or existing political attitudes but not convert them. It states an indirect effect on voting behaviour.

The visit of party or politicians' websites seems to be predestined for such an online effect. Selective exposure to these was proved in a survey conducted by Inoue (2003), which found a significant dependency of the visit of the website of a candidate during U.S. Presidential Elections and the political preference of the respondents. It should be noted that partisan contents online were not limited to such platforms but could be found in other online communication types like weblogs (Abold 2005).

Out of the direct relationship between interpersonal communication and voting behaviour results the last assumption:

4. *Due to homophily, interpersonal political communication online takes place primarily in homogeneous online environments.* People active in those communicative spheres can adapt their voting intention to that of other discussants. This is an expression of a direct communicative effect on voting intention and implicitly also on voting behaviour.

This assumption is argumentatively supported by findings of Kepplinger and Podschuweit (n.d.), who found out that postings in political online discussion boards showed a high congruence with the leading political opinions of those forums.

Method

In order to answer the research question referring to the effect of political communication online on voting, it would be necessary to relate the voting behaviour or previous attitudinal variables with specific influential stimuli. Therefore, Maurer and Reinemann (2006) propose a combination of content analysis and survey data. Due to constraints in resources, this study could not be designed in such a complex way and the author answered the research questions with cross-sectional survey data. The data based on a telephone survey, which was conducted in June and July 2009, starting one week after the election to the European Parliament, and lasted five weeks. The output was a representative sample for the German population of n=809 participants.³ In order to find out the voting behaviour of relevant parties, the final sample consisted of n=384 participants who voted for one of the five parties, which were in the German Federal Parliament by that time.

Figure 3 shows the applied research model. It combines sociological and social psychological variables, which can predict voting behaviour from a political research perspective, like described before. They constitute the main control variables. Variables of political communication online and especially the visit of party websites were the independent variables. Variables of political communication in a traditional way were treated as contrasting control variables.

³ The response rate was 87,9% based on a yearly realised panel survey.

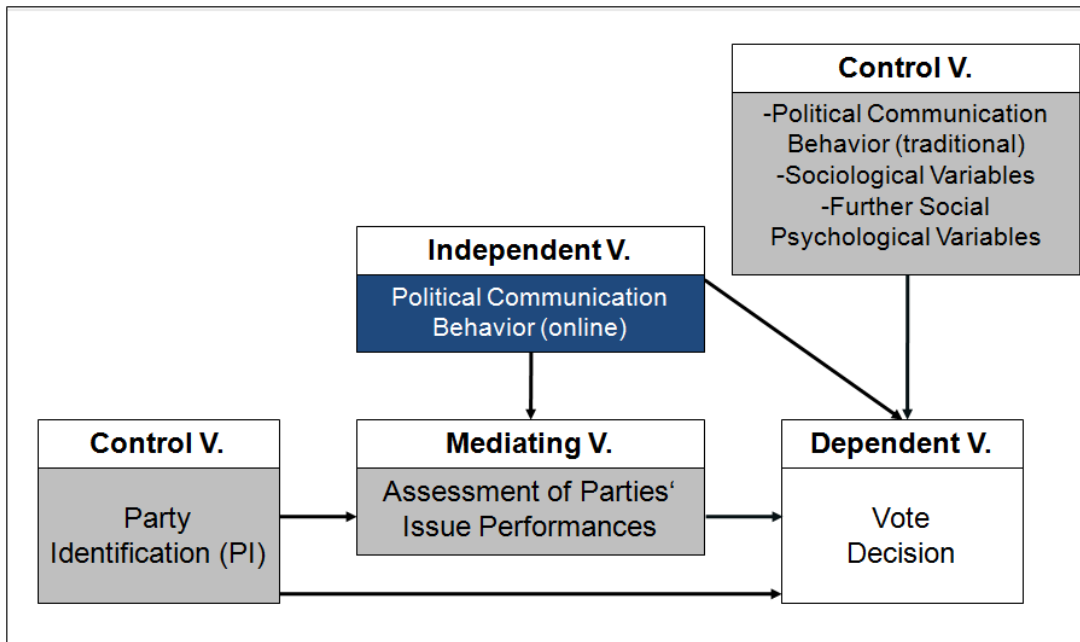


Figure 3: Research Model

Table 1: Measuring the Assessment of Parties' Issue Performances

1. Issue Salience* (according to party)	2. Issue Performance of the parties**
„The low appreciation of families' contributions to society“ (CDU issue)	1. Question for "important" (value>2) issue: Party most able to solve issue -> 2 Points of Issue Performance 2. Question for "important" issue (value>2): Party second most able to solve issue -> 1 Point of Issue Performance <i>If no party mentioned: No Points of Issue Performance</i>
„The financial distress of low-income earners“ (SPD issue)	
„The strong tax load of small and medium-sized businesses“ (FDP issue)	
„The neglect of environmental protection due to the crisis" (B90/Die Grünen issue)	
„The uncontrolled power of banking and finance“ (Die Linke issue)	

* Values: 1 "not important at all" to 5 very important".

** Issue Performance Scale: 0 to 2.

The indirect effects of political communication online were measured through the effect of mediating variables. These were operationalised as the assessment of

parties' issue performances as described in Table 1 (Weßels and Kühnel 2008).⁴ Therefore, participants stated, which two parties were most capable of solving important problems caused by the financial crisis, which was the most salient issue in German media coverage in the year 2009 (Kolmer and Brettschneider 2009). As the respondents only evaluated those issues which were considered to be important for them, these measurements were based on the public agenda setting hypothesis. As further studies showed its validity, this effect is taken as a given premise in the research model without the need to prove it (cf. Rössler 1997).

The dependent variable is the vote decision for or against one of the five parties represented in the German Bundestag (Federal Parliament): CDU, SPD, FDP, Bündnis90/Die Grünen and Die Linke. The model measured direct and indirect effects on voting behaviour through significant standardised beta coefficients and effect coefficients gained by ordinal least square and logistic regression models. As these parameters do not state sufficient evidence of political communication effects and because no hypotheses can be formulated in relation to a specific party vote, the derived assumptions in the last part are no verifiable hypotheses. However, they were used to explain possible, exploratively gained relationships, with theoretical and empirical insights. This design is useful in order to study a considerable amount of communicational activities and to control variables in an economical way, which can be placed in a realistic multicausal context.

All variables were operationalised as metrical, interval, ordinal or dichotomous variables, so that they could be used in bivariate and multivariate analyses (Tab. 3).⁵ The central communication variables consisted mainly in the frequency of or participation to individual political communication within the year before the survey took place.

Party identification, referring to a specific party, was considered the most important control variable in the data analysis. Therefore, several analytical steps were needed. In the first step, logistic regression models found out the relationship between a certain party identification and the voting decision for or against that party. In the next step, the resulting residual variance, which could not be predicted by the party identification, was used as the new dependent variable, following the analytical strategy of Wolling and Kuhlmann (2006).⁶ The third step consisted in correlation analyses between the other variables and the voting behaviour. Variables showing significant correlation with the dependent variable were included in ordinal least square regression models, after being tested for multicollinearity. Significant regressors were nominated as direct effects on voting behaviour.

⁴ The issues were formulated in such way that the parties' different political ideologies were considered.

⁵ This solution is controversial but often observable in empirical research.

⁶ Whenever not related to party identification in the following, voting behaviour expresses its residual variance.

Indirect effects through the mediating variable (assessment of parties' issue performances) were identified following the described last steps, beginning with the calculation of the effect of party identification on the assessment variable - as the social psychological model states an impact of the party identification on the issue orientation as well (Adam 2002, 23-24). Indirect effects were just considered in the model, if the assessment of parties' issue performances showed significant correlations with a specific voting behaviour.

The last step consisted in finding out predictors of political communication online, using ordinal least squares regressions.

Findings

Sample Description

Compared with the total sample of 809 respondents, the proportion of older persons was a bit higher in the "main voter sample" (n=384). This observation goes in line with former findings, stating a higher participation of elder people at the elections to the European Parliament than to the German Federal Election (Kornelius and Roth 2005). On the other side, data show high consistency comparing the samples' sex distribution (less than 1% disparity). The education of the participants in the main voter sample is a bit lower than in the total sample.

Two thirds (66%) of the respondents in the total sample took part in the election to the European Parliament 2009, showing a considerably higher participation than in the population (43,3%). This singularity has to be taken into account critically when interpreting the data. Another critical aspect is the observation that voters who named the party they voted for (n=427) showed small differences in their voting behaviour when compared with official data. This refers to a relatively smaller proportion of voters of the Linke and the CDU/CSU and a relatively bigger proportion of voters of the SPD, the Bündnis90/Die Grünen and the FDP.

Out of the variables of political communication online, the visit of party and politicians' websites will be pointed out descriptively (Tab. 2). The data shows that the visit of the latter is distributed almost homogeneously among the voter groups. 35% of all voters visited politicians' websites. The visit of party websites shows a more heterogeneous distribution. Considering the relatively low amount of visitors by voter groups, the most distinctive finding is a relatively big difference between the voters of the Greens (56%) and liberal voters (32%).

Table 2: Visit of Party and Politicians' Websites Among Voter Groups

<i>Voters of</i>	Visit of Party Websites % yes (n)	Visit of Politicians' Websites % yes (n)
CDU/CSU	40% (29)	31% (22)
SPD	47% (30)	33% (21)
Die Linke	50% (6)	42% (5)
B90/Die Grünen	56% (27)	37% (18)
FDP	32% (12)	40% (15)
Total %	44%	35%
n (total) =	104 (yes)	81 (yes)

Predicting Voting Behaviour

Model Overview. Table 3 sums up the frequency of observed direct and indirect effects on voting behaviour.⁷ First, an overview of the main influences will be shown, followed by the reconstruction of a regression model wherein the postulated assumptions about effects will be discussed focussing the impact of party websites. Voting behaviour could be predicted using regression models for all parties with the exception of „Die Linke“, caused by a very small amount of underlying voters (n=24). All models showed a strong effect of the party identification on voting behaviour (Nagelkerke's $R^2=.38$ to $.60$). The assessment of parties' issue performances was also a significant predictor (adj. $R^2=.16$ to $.32$ of voting behaviours' residual variances). These observations are followed by the considerable influence of the political ideology (left-right self-assessment). Socio-economical variables and the assessment of the general and personal economic situation did not have any effect on voting behaviour – even in a year of economic struggles.

⁷ Analyses testing the communicative effects on voting behaviour using additive indexes showed no significant results and were not illustrated here.

Table 3: Scales and Effects of Modeled Variables

	Rough parameters, scales of measurement	Direct effects: Voting Behavior	Indirect effects: Assessment of parties' issue performances
Variables of political communication online			
Reading political information online	Frequency 1-4, ordinal		
Use of online news sites	Frequency 1-4, ordinal		
Visit of party websites	yes/no, dichotomous		1
Visit of politicians' websites	yes/no, dichotomous		
Reading political weblogs	Frequency 1-5, ordinal		
Reading political articles in Wikipedia	Frequency 1-5, ordinal		
Watching political videos on video-sharing websites	Frequency 1-5, ordinal		
Listening/watching to political podcasts / videocasts	Frequency 1-5, ordinal		
Use of social networks for political purposes	Frequency 1-5, ordinal		
Political discussions in online forums	Frequency 0-3, ordinal	1	
Contact with politicians online	Frequency 0-3, interval		
Participating to an online petition	Frequency, metrical		
Producing political contents online	yes/no, dichotomous		
Sending links to political contents online	Frequency 1-5, ordinal		
Variables of traditional political communication			
Watching TV news	Frequency 1-5, ordinal		
Watching political magazines on TV	Frequency 1-3, ordinal		2
Reading about politics and economics in daily newspapers	Frequency index 0-7, ordinal	1	
Reading weekly newspapers or news magazines	yes/no, dichotomous	1	
Information about EU-election through paid media	Information intensity 1-4, ordinal		1
Political discussions with friends or colleagues	Frequency, metrical		
Contact with politicians	Frequency, metrical	1	
Attending to a campaign event	yes/no, dichotomous	1	
Participating to a petition	Frequency, metrical		
Sociological variables			
Confession: catholic	yes/no, dichotomous	1	
Confession: protestant	yes/no, dichotomous		
No confession	yes/no, dichotomous		
Monthly net income	1 (1.000) - 4 (over 4.000 Euro), ordinal		
Size of the place of residence	1 (20.000) - 5 (over 499.999 Hab.), ordinal	1	
Age	metrical		
Highest educational qualification	0 (without qual.) -5 (university degree), quasi-ordinal		
Social psychological variables			
Party identification (party-specific)	yes/no, dichotomous	4	5
Assessment of party's issue performance	0-2 issue performance points for each party, metrical	5	-
Political ideology (Left-right self assessment)	1 (left) - 10 (right), ordinal	1	4
Assessment of the general economic situation	1 (very bad) - 4 (very good), ordinal		
Assessment of the personal economic situation	1 (very bad) - 4 (very good), ordinal		
Assessment of personal importance of religion	1 (very unimportant) - 4 (very important), ordinal		1

All in all, social psychological variables seem to have more impact on voting than sociological characteristics of the respondents. When comparing the two ways of political communication, there is a higher amount of predictors on the traditional side of political communication. The regression models explaining the vote/non-vote for the CDU/CSU, the SPD and the FDP did not yield any significant direct or indirect effects of political communication online on voting – including the use of party websites. But there is some evidence that such effects could have taken place in regard to the Green voters⁸. In the following part, the observations regarding this model will be illustrated stepwise (Fig. 4, 5 and 7).

Green Party Model. Figure 4 shows that party identification (PI) was a strong positive predictor of the vote for the Bündnis90/Die Grünen. The likelihood that respondents identifying with the Greens voted for the Greens was 93 times higher than without this underlying party identification ($\text{Exp}(B) = 93,00^{***}$).⁹ PI could predict 55% of the variance of this dependent variable.

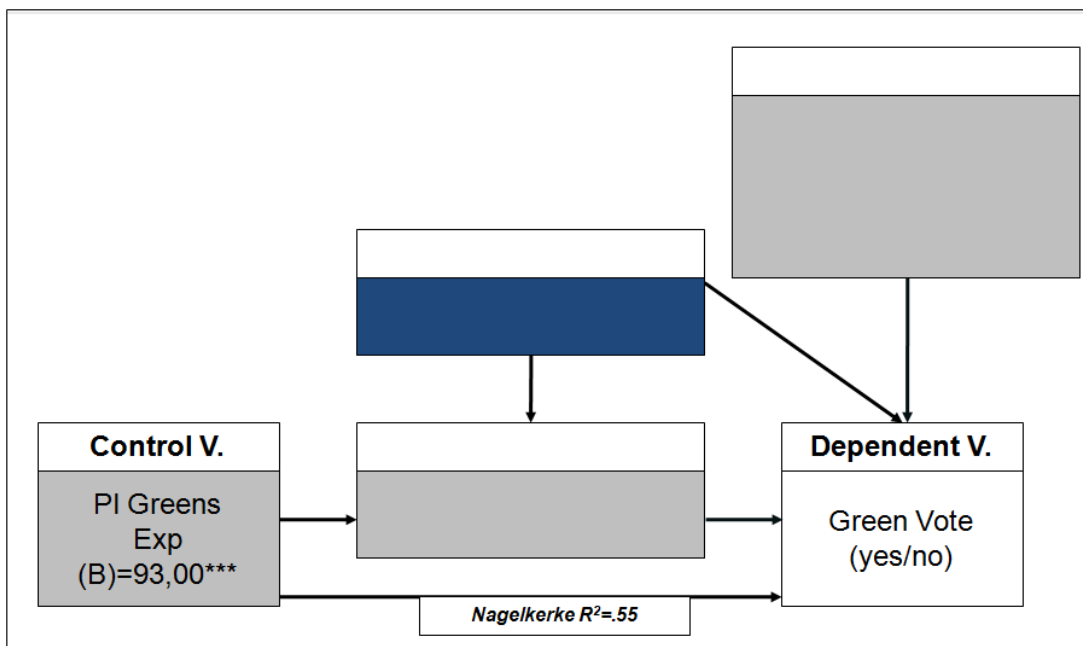


Figure 4: Direct Effect of Party Identification on the Green Vote

⁸ The total amount of Green voters is n=59.

⁹ The levels of significance were interpreted as follows: $p > .05$ „not significant“, $p \leq .05$ „significant“ or „*“, $p \leq .01$ „very significant“ or „**“ and $p \leq .001$ „highly significant“ or „***“.

The next step (Fig. 5) takes this influence into consideration and focuses on further direct predictors of the residual variance of the Green vote, which consists of 45% of the original dependent variable. The fourth assumption formulated a direct effect of interpersonal communication online on voting. This effect could be identified empirically. There was a slightly positive effect of the frequency of political discussions online on voting for the Green Party ($\beta=.19^{***}$). Voters of the Greens discussed about politics online more often than voters of other parties. The mean value within a range from 0 to 3 was 0,7 for the Green voters – voters of the CDU/CSU being less than half as active ($M=0,3$). This difference seems to be small at first sight. But as the reference values are all rather low, this small difference can be interpreted as relatively big. This positive effect indicates that a small part of the Green voters communicated within politically homogeneous online environments. As formulated in the fourth assumption, this homogeneity could have led to a voting alignment.

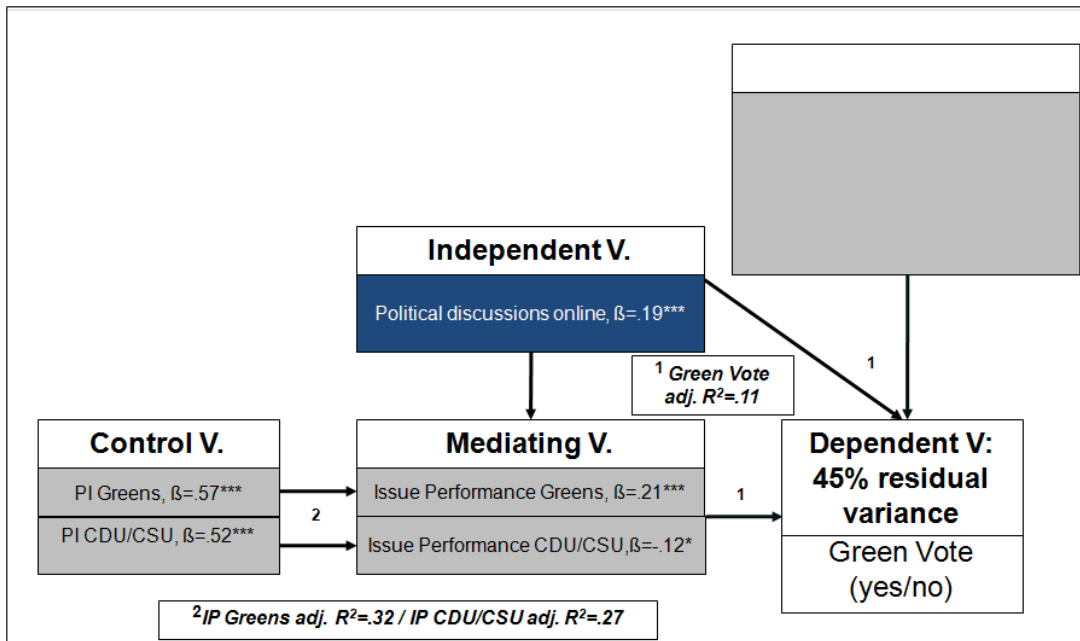


Figure 5: Further Direct Effects on the Green Vote

Two further direct effects on voting were caused by the assessment of the parties' issue performances. A positive assessment of the issue performance of the Bündnis90/Die Grünen has a medium positive impact on the Green vote ($\beta=.21^{***}$). On the other side, there is a light negative effect of the assessment of the CDU/CSU's issue performance on the Green vote ($\beta=-.12^*$). The model also "isolated" the effect of the party identification. On one hand, the party identification with the CDU/CSU could predict 27% of the variance of the assessment of the CDU/CSU's issue performance.

On the other hand, party identification with the Bündnis90/Die Grünen explained 32% of the variance of the assessment of the Greens issue performance. Hence, party identification showed not only strong direct but also indirect effects on the Green vote. Without considering party identification, the direct effects have to be evaluated as quite small, as they can just explain 11% of the residual variance of the vote for the Bündnis90/Die Grünen.

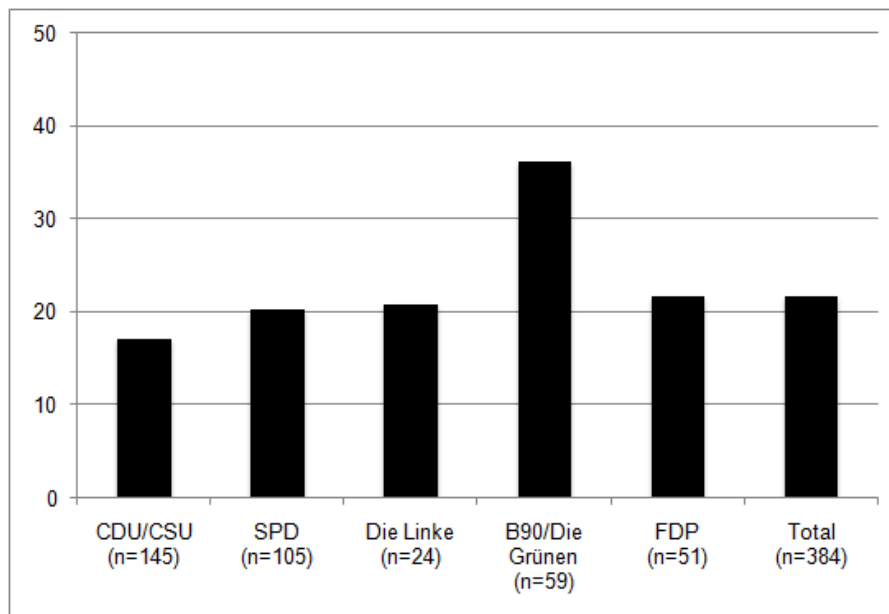


Figure 6: Voters who visited Party Websites of the Voted Party (in % of Voter Group)

Green voters not only visited party websites most often, they also visited the website of their elected party more often than other voter groups (Fig. 6). 36% of the Green voters but only 17% of the CDU/CSU voters visited the websites of the party they voted for. This observation implies that voters of the Green Party used party websites more selectively than others. This observation should be taken into account when interpreting the positive effect of the visit of party websites on the assessment of the Greens' issue performance ($\beta=.14^{**}$) (Fig. 7). As the latter is positive related to the Green vote ($\beta=.21^{***}$), this effect could indicate an activation or reinforcement of latent or existing political attitudes caused by the visit of the Green Party's website. This could have been followed by a more positive assessment of the Bündnis90/Die Grünen and a positive effect on the Green vote. This gives statistical support for the third assumption. The two first assumptions could not be supported by the data.

As already mentioned, political communication online, and therefore also the visit of party websites, can be influenced by several individual characteristics (Tab. 4)

In line with former findings, interest in politics ($\text{Exp}(B)=2,46^{***}$), sex (male, $\text{Exp}(B)=2,34^{**}$) and education ($\text{Exp}(B)=1,34^{**}$) increased the likelihood of having visited party websites. On the other side, as higher the age of the respondents ($\text{Exp}(B)=0,97^{***}$) was, as lower the likelihood that they had visited party websites. These observations indicate that the indirect effect of the visit of party websites on voting should be interpreted specifically.

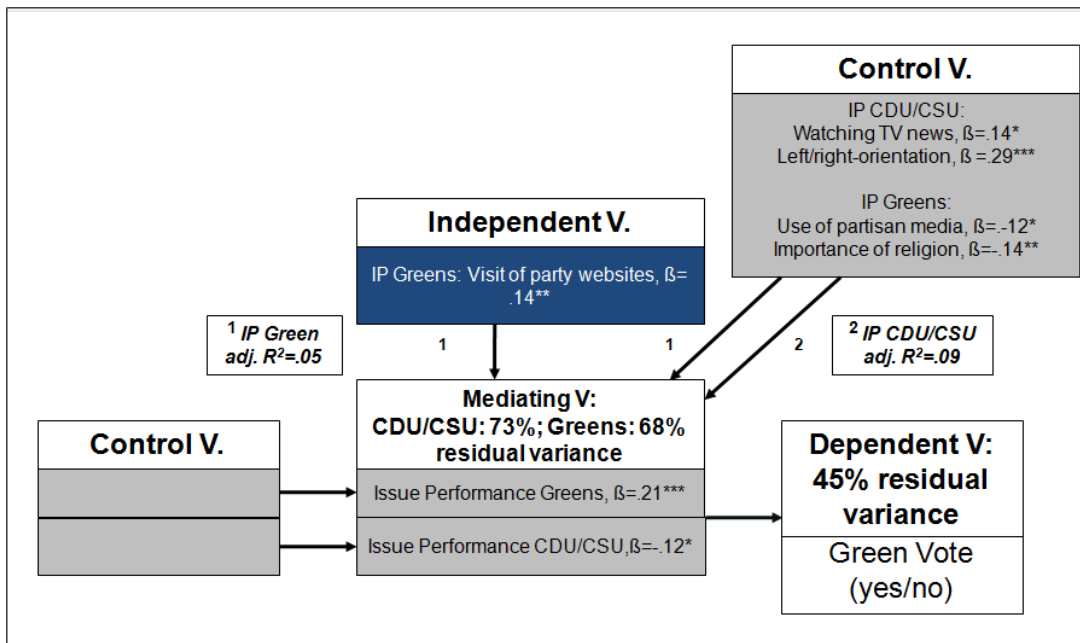


Figure 7: Indirect Effects on the Green Vote

Table 4: Predictors of the Visit of Party Websites

Variable	Visit of Party Websites Exp(B)
Interest in politics (1 "no" to 5 "very strong")	2,46***
Sex (1 "female", 2 "male")	2,34**
Highest educational qualification (0 to 5)	1,34**
Age	0,97***
Nagelkerke R^2	.23
<i>n</i>	380

Beside effects of the importance of religion and the left-right orientation on the mediating variables, two statistical relationships including traditional communication variables were found as well. Using parties' information about the election through paid media ($\beta = -.12^*$) had a slightly negative effect on the assessment of Green Party's issue performance. It seems that using traditional partisan media contents neither activated nor reinforced political attitudes in such way that the Bündnis90/Die Grünen would have been evaluated more positively. Further, the evaluation of the CDU/CSU can as well be predicted by watching political magazines on TV ($\beta = .14^*$). This effect restrained the Green vote slightly indirectly and could cautiously be interpreted as a priming effect. The reception of such media contents referring to the financial crisis could have had an effect on the criteria of how voters evaluated parties, driving to a better performance assessment of the CDU/CSU.

Without considering party identification, overall indirect effects on Green vote are quite small. Just 9% of the residual variance of the assessment of CDU/CSU's and 5% of the Green Party's issue performance could be predicted.

Discussion

The results demonstrated small but significant effects of political communication online in general and showed that visiting party websites could have had an indirect positive, and therefore mobilising effect on voting for the Green Party. Especially the latter effect could have been forced through the structure of the Green Party website, offering more mobilising features as shown by Schweitzer (2010b). It can be further speculated, and hence, researched, whether this possible effect could have been caused through the reception of negative campaigning – as frequently supplied by the Green Party website.

The study did not answer the question whether parties “may lose the elections on the Internet”. However, although exploratively driven, it revealed feasible effects of the political use of the Net, because it controlled relevant variables and used representative data. The models emphasised the big impact of the traditional predictors of voting behaviour such as party identification and issue orientation. At the same time, the models also showed a methodological possibility to measure communicative attitudinal effects with an extended social psychological model. The therefore required linking variable – the assessment of parties' issue performances – was a significant predictor of voting behaviour in several models.

Nevertheless, this empirical study should not remain uncriticised. The total sample represented more voters than in the population, hence, findings could be somewhat biased. In addition, the cross-sectional design could hardly show agenda-setting or priming effects in a valid way. The findings, i.e. stating a priming effect due to watching political magazines, remain on an explorative level. Further, the observed

indirect and direct statistical relationships of the visit of party websites and political discussion online on voting cannot be interpreted as mere causal relationships. It is conceivable that on the contrary, both these communication activities are the result of the intention of voting for the Green Party. An underlying reciprocal relationship could be also possible.

To clarify this uncertainty, consecutive empirical research should focus on panel designs. Another recommendation refers to the limitations of the hereby analyzed voting behaviour at the election to the European Parliament, which is based on the observation that the participation of younger citizens is lower than in the German Federal Election (Kornelius and Roth 2005). If the research context was placed during the latter, it could be assumed that the effects of the visit of party websites would be higher, as an important predictor for being politically communicative on the Net would rather be fulfilled by the voting population.

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