The Campaign and its Dynamics at the 2009 German General Election

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This article analyses the 2009 German federal election campaign with specific emphasis on the three categories of actors that play key roles in contemporary election campaigns – parties and their candidates, the mass media, and the voters. Mainly aiming at a theoretically informed comprehensive description, the article addresses some key themes of the recent literature on electioneering. The Bundestag election on 27 September 2009 was preceded by a campaign that lacked drama. There were several reasons for the absence of a more polarised campaign, not least the fact that CDU/CSU and SPD had been tied together in a Grand Coalition and had to deal with massive political challenges. Against the background of an unclear picture painted by the media, the feasibility and likelihood of various types of government coalitions were dominant topics of the campaign. The CDU/CSU in many respects had an edge over the SPD.

During election campaigns the parties and their candidates seek to influence the perceptions and attitudes of voters by means of strategically planned communications in order to improve their chances of being elected. At the same time, voters follow political communication with increased interest in order to gain information that helps them to arrive at meaningful choices. Mass media such as TV or the press play an indispensable role as mediators between these two agencies. Against the background of declining party identification and a rising number of voters deciding relatively late in the campaign, it appears reasonable to assume that the relevance of election campaigns for voting behaviour has increased in recent decades. In several respects, this development puts parties under ‘stress’. First of all, parties are well advised to attach greater importance to electioneering. Moreover, in doing so they can no longer confine themselves to a predominant focus on mobilising and activating their own supporters. Instead, they need to design and implement complex strategies that attract independent voters without alienating long-standing core supporters. In the following, we analyse the campaign that preceded the German federal election on 27 September 2009, with special emphasis on the three agencies that play key roles in contemporary election campaigns – parties and their candidates, voters, and the mass media. While mainly aiming at a comprehensive account of the 2009 campaign, the article also addresses some key themes of the recent theoretical
literature on electioneering. We begin by describing how, and under what conditions, the parties conducted their campaigns in the run-up to the 2009 Bundestag election. Then we move on to a brief investigation of how the mass media fulfilled their function as most important mediating agencies with regard to electoral information. In the final section we analyse how the voters’ perceptions, attitudes and party preferences developed during the pre-election period.

PARTIES

The media judgement on the 2009 election campaign can be summarised in one word: boring. Most observers described it as such. The dullness of the campaign had to do with the political circumstances at the time, which were unusual in several respects. First and foremost among these is the fact that the two main competitors, CDU/CSU and SPD, had to run campaigns against one another while still continuing their collaboration in the Grand Coalition government, which had been the outcome of the previous election. Even though both parties made it clear that neither of them aimed for a continuation of this cooperation, the ongoing financial and economic crisis that had broken out a year before required their immediate and undivided attention right until election day. Although some conflicts between the coalition partners were staged tactically on occasion, they remained rare events. Considering the severity and immediacy of the problems on the government’s agenda, symbolically exaggerated disputes between the political rivals certainly would not have met with many voters’ approval. Nonetheless, in stark contrast to the preceding campaign in 2005, journalists and voters to some degree missed the traditional dramaturgy of German electioneering in 2009. It cannot come as a surprise, therefore, that the media described the campaign as ‘noiseless and devoid of content’, or even as a ‘Valium campaign’.

Moreover, the information concerning the popularity of parties that opinion polls commissioned by the mass media constantly fed back into the circuit of campaign communications did not provide a basis for the emergence of a clear constellation of conflict between opposing camps (see Figure 1). According to the polls, a respectable result clearly above the 5 per cent threshold of the electoral system was to be expected for the three smaller parties. The liberal FDP appeared as front-runner of the opposition parties, followed by the Greens and the Left Party which had initially been trailing but improved its standing during the final phase of the campaign. Based on these numbers, it seemed clear from the beginning that the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) would end up with a considerably better election result than the Social Democrats (SPD), even though the latter somewhat increased their share of supporters before election day. However, based on the polls one could not be sure that the CDU/CSU and FDP would secure the combined majority of votes that was needed to form the ‘Black–Yellow’ coalition these two parties aspired to (see below). If anything, this uncertainty increased towards the end of the campaign. Accordingly, parties, journalists and voters, all tending to rely on polls as a common reference point for assessing the likelihood of certain election outcomes, were confronted with the question of what the alternatives to this government could be. The traditional pattern with two-party blocs of the left and of the right competing with one another for
votes, which had been typical of German federal elections for more than two decades, had become obsolete at the 2005 election to the Bundestag. In view of the unclear majorities that this election had produced, the scenarios of continuing the Grand Coalition or of forming hitherto untried three-party coalitions transcending greater ideological differences had come under discussion as options for forming majority governments under these dramatically changed circumstances.  

Strategically, several similarities between the parties were to be observed. Apparently, the parties had learned their lessons from the SPD’s catch-up race during the last weeks of the 2005 election campaign. More than ever before, they concentrated their campaigning activities on the final days before the election, in order to mobilise all available energies in the final spurt to secure the support of the ever-increasing number of voters deciding relatively late in the campaign. Furthermore, all parties emphasised the benefits of campaigning at the grassroots. Contrary to the long-term trend of relying ever more strongly on the capacity of the mass media for conveying campaign messages, the parties placed heavy emphasis on their adherents as personalised multiplicators for party communications during the 2009 campaign. Many references in parties’ strategy documents suggest that, in that respect, they tried to learn lessons from Barack Obama’s successful campaign for the US Presidency in 2008. The Obama campaign also served as a model with regard to the heavy usage of the Internet for campaign communications. In contrast to former Bundestag election campaigns, it was not only used to showcase the parties to the conventional mass media and
to prove their modernity; in 2009 it was also supposed to serve as a platform of Net-based interpersonal partisan communications. Thus, the parties came up with their regular websites and – similar to previous campaigns – candidate homepages solely created for reasons of campaigning. The major innovations of the 2009 campaign were special support websites which offered interested citizens the opportunity to volunteer their support to parties’ campaigns. In addition, the parties and their candidates made heavy use of social networks in an attempt to mobilise first-time voters. The blogging service Twitter was also discovered as a medium for conveying campaign messages. Moreover, once more adopting the US model, campaigners used the Internet and other modern means of communication, such as SMS texting, for fund-raising purposes.

The parties’ campaign budgets were similar to those in the previous federal election campaign, or exceeded them slightly in some cases. According to a trade journal of the advertising industry, the SPD’s campaign budget amounted to €27 million, whereas the CDU planned to spend €20 million (for the CSU no data is available). Even though the small parties intended to spend more than in 2005, they invested much less than the larger parties overall. The Left Party planned to spend €5 million on its election campaign, the FDP budgeted for €4.8 million and the Greens drew up a campaign budget of €4 million. Only the Greens followed the model of the SPD’s legendary 1998 ‘Kampa’ and established a campaign ‘war room’ outside their party headquarters. All other campaign organisations were set up within the parties’ head offices. The 2009 election campaign unfolded without particular highlights. As it ran its course, few events stood out, most notably the parties’ kick-off rallies which were staged between late July and early September, and above all the TV debate of the two chancellor candidates Angela Merkel (CDU/CSU) and Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) on 13 September (see below). In addition, particular attention was paid to the state elections in Thuringia, Saxony and Saarland as well as the local election in the largest German state, North Rhine-Westphalia, which all took place on 30 August, just a few weeks before citizens were called to the polls for the Bundestag election.

In the following we will describe the campaigns of the five Bundestag parties along central dimensions of campaigning, including the parties’ initial positions, goals and strategies (e.g. campaign organisation, targeting, personalisation, themes and coalition strategies) as well as the basic conditions influencing the course of their campaigns.

The campaign of the CDU/CSU

When planning their campaign, the Christian Democrats obviously drew lessons from 2005. At that election, the CDU/CSU had hoped to attract voters through a ‘strategy of honesty’ which announced severe cutbacks and new financial burdens for citizens – a strategy that obviously had not worked and eventually came to be considered a severe mistake within the party. Instead of launching a confrontational campaign focusing on social change under the auspices of socio-economic liberalism – for which it had earned massive attacks from its political opponents – the CDU/CSU tried to beat the SPD on its own turf in 2009. In terms of social and economic policy the CDU/CSU’s 2009 manifesto was much more centrist than the previous one. On cultural and life-style issues, the party shifted its position even more strongly to the middle.
Overall, the relevance of political issues for the CDU/CSU’s campaign was quite limited, however. Instead, the party conducted a highly personalised campaign. Concentrating its electioneering efforts on the personality of Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU), the CDU/CSU hoped to gain votes by capitalising on its leader’s ‘incumbency bonus’. Adopting the ‘presidential’ and politically rather vague personal style that she had already cultivated in office during the previous legislative term, Merkel sought to avoid offending anyone. Through ‘governing instead of campaigning’ she hoped to draw advantage from her visibility bonus as head of government.

Towards the end of the campaign the CDU/CSU therefore modified its campaign slogan from ‘We got the power’ to ‘We vote for the chancellor’, sharpening their campaign even more on Chancellor Merkel. Even though the CDU/CSU’s policy positions would have allowed for a continuation of the coalition with the SPD, the FDP was its chosen partner for the next federal government. To revive the ‘Black–Yellow’ coalition, which had been voted out of office in 1998, was the unanimous aim of both the CDU/CSU and the Liberals.

The CDU’s Bavarian sister party CSU did not enjoy much visibility during the campaign. Only the Federal Minister of Economic Affairs Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, who had quickly managed to become one of the most popular German politicians after entering cabinet in early 2009, enjoyed significant public attention. However, his publicity was not all positive. The overall popularity of the ‘smart baron’ time and again made him a natural target for attacks from the SPD. Within the CDU/CSU campaign, the CSU in part nurtured its own agenda, which consisted in gaining more votes than the FDP in order to be more influential in the future coalition government. Accordingly, especially during the last three weeks before election day, the CSU attacked the Liberals in Bavaria with a massive second vote campaign. Moreover, the CSU tried to distance itself from the FDP to some degree by denouncing it as party of ‘social cold-heartedness’ and promising a ‘100 days crash programme for growth and labour’.

The campaign of the SPD

Led by their chancellor candidate Frank-Walter-Steinmeier, the foreign minister and vice chancellor of the Grand Coalition, the Social Democrats had a rough start to the 2009 election campaign. The reforms implemented by the ‘Red–Green’ government of Gerhard Schröder (SPD), but also some of the Social Democrats’ policies during the four years of the Grand Coalition had led to internal struggles within the party and to alienation tendencies among its core clientele groups. Many saw the SPD’s recent policies as a betrayal of their identity as the party of social justice. Numerous replacements in the party leadership in recent years and a dramatically failed attempt of the SPD to form a government in the state of Hesse with the help of the Left Party in the previous year had severely damaged the party’s reputation. The SPD’s poor standing in the polls (see Figure 1) reflected this disadvantageous state of affairs. Like the CDU/CSU, the Social Democrats opted for a personalised campaign strategy focusing primarily on their chancellor candidate. However, media commentators tended to find Steinmeier ‘too pale, too unemotional, too stiff and too boring’.

As acting vice chancellor of the Grand Coalition he also could not play the card of a more aggressive campaign to sharpen his image. During its campaign,
the SPD seemed to vacillate between the seduction of a more polarising attack strategy on the one hand, which for voters would have been difficult to understand in view of the continued constructive cooperation in the Grand Coalition and the CDU/CSU’s moderate policy positions, and a strategy emphasising the policy outcomes reached over the last four years, on the other.28 The SPD’s campaign slogan was simply ‘Our country can do better’.

Somewhat contradictory to its government record at the time, at the previous election the SPD had chosen a campaign strategy which focused on traditional social democratic issues.29 In their 2009 election manifesto, the Social Democrats positioned themselves even farther to the left in terms of social and economic policies. On cultural issues, they also moved in a more progressive direction.30 However, the SPD’s attempts to set the thematic agenda of the campaign overall showed little success. Even Steinmeier’s well-publicised ‘Plan for Germany’, which strongly emphasised labour market policies, did not find much resonance in public debate. Other issues the SPD tried to score with were the future of nuclear power and troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pinched between the Left Party, which claimed to be the only warrantor of social justice, on the one hand, and a ‘social democratised’ CDU/CSU competing on the Social Democrats’ own terrain, on the other, the SPD had a hard time to define for itself a distinct profile.

Moreover, in view of the unclear picture painted by the polls, the Social Democrats were asked over and over again for convincing answers to the difficult, but all the more interesting to journalists for exactly that reason, question of which potential coalition partners they could join forces to form a new government after the election. They had a hard time to come up with plausible justifications for rejecting a coalition with the Left Party on the federal level, while at the same time engaging in that form of collaboration in some of the states. The SPD’s officially pronounced coalition strategy aimed for a ‘Traffic-light’ coalition with the Greens and the FDP, and it also did not seem particularly convincing as the Liberals clearly ruled out any such collaboration. Moreover, the Social Democrats did not refrain from constantly criticising the FDP for its ‘neoliberal’ policies. Hence, since the polls signalled that a sufficient majority to revive the ‘Red–Green’ coalition was out of reach, the SPD was unable to offer voters a credible scenario to take over governmental power after the election. The only way the Social Democrats could be expected to remain in government was by continuing the Grand Coalition. Consequently, aggressive attacks against the Christian Democrats and their chancellor candidate seemed all the more inappropriate.

The campaign of the FDP
The FDP had clear goals which, against the background of the polls, did not seem unrealistic: forming a ‘Black–Yellow’ coalition, a double-digit election result overall and respectable results in all of the states. Regarding campaign themes, the FDP primarily focused on taxes. The Liberals promised a simplification of the tax system and tax cuts amounting to €35 billion.31 With that campaign agenda, the FDP did not deviate significantly from the market liberal position it had already emphasised during the 2005 campaign.32 A crucial element of the Liberals’ campaign strategy was a second-vote campaign with repeated criticism of the CDU/CSU, denouncing the Christian Democrats as secretly fancying a continuation of the
Grand Coalition. They tried to style themselves as the market-oriented corrective in the ‘Black–Yellow’ coalition they were striving for, and sought to gain enough votes to play a really powerful role in the future cabinet. Focusing on the party leader Guido Westerwelle, the FDP campaign was also characterised by a high degree of personalisation. However, the party’s attempt to present a ‘shadow cabinet’ to demonstrate its ability to govern was not echoed by the media. For this reason the FDP campaign, intentionally or unintentionally, stayed focused on the lead candidate, Westerwelle. Anticipating his desired role as foreign minister in a future government with the CDU/CSU, the Liberals’ leader already acted in a quite statesmanlike manner during the campaign.

The campaign of the Greens

Under the slogan ‘Only Green helps out of the crisis’, the Greens concentrated on the themes of the environment and labour. Against the background of the ongoing economic and financial crises, their campaign focused on ecological industrial policies and was thereby tied up with the traditional core issue of the party. However, its concept of a ‘Green New Deal’ found little public recognition. A technical incident in a nuclear power plant – one of few unanticipated events during an otherwise uneventful campaign period – put an environmental problem on the agenda and was thus favourable for the Greens as the party traditionally ‘owning’ that issue. In their manifesto the Greens positioned themselves close to the SPD in terms of social and economic policies, but on cultural topics they took much more progressive stance. Since Joschka Fischer, the former figurehead of the Greens, had left the political stage after the demise of the ‘Red–Green’ coalition, the party had to run its campaign with less well-known and popular lead candidates (Renate Künast and Jürgen Trittin). It thus opted for a strategy that was less personalised than those of the other parties. The question of how the Greens might gain access to a future government turned out to be difficult terrain. On the one hand, they rejected a ‘Red–Red–Green’ collaboration which would have included the Left Party, although in terms of policy positions this model of government cooperation would have seemed conceivable, but also a coalition with CDU/CSU and FDP, on the other. Although it seemed that the leaders of the party were not strictly opposed to such a ‘Jamaica’ coalition, they had to yield to a party congress vote against considering this option. As the FDP excluded forming a coalition with the SPD and the Greens, the Greens were in the same difficult situation as the SPD: they could not offer their voters a plausible government scenario.

The campaign of the Left Party

After the Left Party, which had been founded in 2007 by way of a fusion of the mainly East German PDS (the follow-up party of the SED) and the West German WASG (Electoral Alternative Employment and Social Justice), had proven quite successful at several recent state elections and had even gained seats in some West German state parliaments, it self-confidently strove for the goal of achieving a double-digit election result at the 2009 federal election. Its campaign targeted groups such as young and female voters, immigrants, protest and non-voters, socially deprived groups and trade union members; in particular the campaign was directed at disappointed previous voters of the SPD. Thematically, the campaign emphasised two
topics: social justice and peace. Moreover, the Left Party was the only party which promised an immediate withdrawal of German troops from Afghanistan. Its campaign used highly emotional slogans. In terms of policy positions expressed in its manifesto, the Left Party was located close to the Greens with regard to cultural and lifestyle issues, but to the left of both the Greens and the Social Democrats with regard to social and economic issues. Like most other parties, the Left Party also chose a highly personalised campaign strategy. As its two lead candidates, Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi, were well-known figures, the party counted on their positive influence on the election result. While coalition politics proved a difficult area for some of the other parties, it was easy for the Left Party. It strongly rejected the role of providing the necessary majority to help other parties into governmental office, and defined its own role mainly as being a thorn in the flesh of the SPD.

MASS MEDIA

Even though most of the parties’ campaign budget is normally spent on direct forms of communication with the electorate, their chances to reach voters by such means are quite limited. Parties’ campaign leaflets and brochures, for instance, have only been taken note of by every third voter during the 2009 campaign. Direct forms of party contact, such as attending street stands and rallies, but also modes of technically mediated communication, such as accessing party websites, or email and SMS messages, were observed for even fewer electors. Of all direct means of party communication, traditional forms of advertising, such as billboards, newspaper advertisements or TV spots received the widest attention. However, nowadays the most important conveyor of party-related information, including the parties’ own messages to the electorate, is not the parties’ own direct communications but the mass media’s editorial coverage. The 2009 German election campaign was no exception to this rule.

For decades, the dominant conveyer of campaign information in Germany has been TV news. Parties have become accustomed to planning campaigns with their TV resonance in mind, while voters mainly follow election campaigns via the coverage they get on TV. In 2009 the leading role of TV remained unchallenged. During the campaign, more than 80 per cent of a representative sample of voters stated that during an average week they obtained political information through TV news (public TV news: 75 per cent, commercial TV news: 36 per cent), and 74 per cent read political reports in a daily newspaper. The reach of the weekly press was much lower at only 13 per cent. The Internet, to which – as discussed above – the parties attributed great strategic importance, played only a slightly more important role than previously as a source of electoral information (17 per cent).

Although the campaign of 2009 had been apostrophised as boring by many journalists, on TV it took up just as much airtime as the considerably more turbulent campaign that had preceded the 2005 Bundestag election. The total volume of campaign coverage amounted to about 101 hours (2005: 109 hours). For the most part it was provided by the public broadcasters ARD und ZDF. While overall devoting less airtime to election-related programmes, the commercial channels in 2009 invested some effort in inventing innovative new TV formats which mixed campaign coverage with
entertaining elements. Just as in the previous two elections, the single TV event which attracted by far the largest audience was the TV debate between the chancellor candidates Angela Merkel and Frank-Walter Steinmeier on 13 September 2009, and the related pre- and post-debate coverage. Simultaneously televised by four channels – the two public service stations ARD and ZDF as well as the two most widely seen commercial channels RTL and SAT.1 – it reached more than 14 million viewers, making it not only the most important election broadcast by far, but also the biggest TV event of the entire year. The TV debate’s equivalent for the small parties, the so-called ‘TV-Dreikampf’ (ARD), also attracted more than 4 million viewers.

For the parties themselves, but also for observers who seek to comprehend electors’ decision-making at a particular election, the way in which the competing parties are portrayed by the media is of utmost importance.\textsuperscript{45} Of particular relevance is the tone of media coverage about the various parties and their candidates, i.e. how favourable or unfavourable they appear in the media’s political reporting.\textsuperscript{46} One way to get an impression of the media’s tone is to rely on the perceptions of their audiences.\textsuperscript{47} Several studies have repeatedly demonstrated that Germany’s five national quality newspapers occupy distinct positions on the ideological left–right continuum.\textsuperscript{48} The same pattern also emerged in these dailies’ readers’ perceptions during the 2009 campaign (Table 1).

To be sure, many readers did not detect any party-related favouritism in these newspapers’ coverage. However, of those readers of \textit{Die Welt} and the \textit{Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung} (FAZ) who saw particular parties advantaged in their papers’ reporting, most felt that this concerned the CDU/CSU and – only in the case of the FAZ – the FDP. The coverage of the \textit{Süddeutsche Zeitung} (SZ), the \textit{Frankfurter Rundschau} (FR) and the \textit{tageszeitung} (taz) in contrast seemed to be more favourable towards the SPD. Moreover, FR and taz also, although to differing degrees, were perceived as favouring the Greens; and the taz was also thought to favour the Left Party. In the country’s most widely read daily, the tabloid \textit{Bild}, the CDU/CSU, but not the FDP were seen as having an advantage over the other parties.

Since the local and regional press with its more than 300 titles accounted for the lion’s share of the 23 million newspapers on average sold in Germany during the third quarter of 2009,\textsuperscript{49} it is reasonable to assume that these newspapers might have played a more decisive role in voting behaviour at the 2009 election than the national

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{Readers’ perceptions of party-related favouritism in daily newspapers (%; multiple responses possible)}
\begin{tabular}{lrrrrrr}
\hline
 & Welt & FAZ & SZ & FR & taz & BILD & Local/ regional press \\
\hline
CDU/CSU & 30.0 & 37.2 & 14.6 & 18.0 & 5.6 & 28.1 & 23.3 \\
SPD & 4.7 & 10.3 & 26.1 & 43.4 & 15.5 & 8.5 & 11.4 \\
FDP & 3.1 & 11.2 & 1.6 & 7.1 & 3.0 & 3.6 & 2.2 \\
Greens & 0.4 & 0.0 & 2.5 & 10.9 & 30.5 & 0.8 & 0.7 \\
Left Party & 0.7 & 0.5 & 0.6 & 5.0 & 15.5 & 1.3 & 1.3 \\
Others & 0.0 & 0.0 & 0.3 & 0.0 & 0.8 & 0.0 & 0.2 \\
None & 58.2 & 47.9 & 51.7 & 34.8 & 40.3 & 39.3 & 54.8 \\
Don’t know & 5.7 & 7.5 & 7.7 & 2.0 & 9.1 & 23.6 & 11.5 \\
\hline
(N) & (155) & (361) & (356) & (79) & (63) & (798) & (3671) \\
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
newspapers. According to Table 1, within this most voluminous segment of the German newspaper market the CDU/CSU overall had an advantage over the other parties, although not as clearly as in *Die Welt*, *FAZ* and *Bild*. Unlike the press, TV news is legally required to adhere to the norm of pluralistic and balanced coverage; it therefore cannot follow clear editorial lines. In Table 2 this fact is expressed in the finding that the various major TV newscasts’ audiences much more frequently than in the case of the press felt that none of the parties obtained a more favourable coverage than the others. However, to the degree that such impressions were present at all among TV viewers the CDU/CSU again emerges as the party which appeared most often as having obtained more positive coverage than other parties.

**VOTERS**

According to many observers’ impression, the 2009 party campaigns were conducted with at least one foot on the brake. Overall, the campaign process proceeded without dramatic twists and turns, and was modest in tone. During the very different preceding election campaign of 2005, which had been highly confrontational and turbulent, there had been clear movements of voters’ perceptions, attitudes and preferences. How did public opinion develop during the run-up to the 2009 election? Did it reflect the toned down character of this campaign, or was it as dynamic as at the previous election? In answering these questions, the distinction between manifest and latent functions of electioneering should be kept in mind. The manifest functions have to do with the parties’ main motive for running campaigns – to influence the perceptions, attitudes and preferences of voters through tailored communication activities with the ultimate purpose of gaining votes and winning elections. However, apart from these manifest functions of electioneering, campaigning may also fulfil important latent functions that may not necessarily be on the parties’ agendas when they engage in campaign activities, but may nonetheless be crucially important for the functioning of the political process of representative democracy. These latent functions concern the involvement, motivation and mobilisation of voters, which boost turnout and help voters to arrive at informed and well-grounded voting decisions. In the following section we first take a look at the political involvement as well as mobilisation of voters, i.e. how the 2009
campaign contributed to fulfilling its latent functions. Then we proceed to an inquiry of the manifest dimension of campaigning – the degree to which the campaign led to changes in the perceptions and attitudes of voters regarding parties, candidates and coalitions.

Involvement and mobilisation of voters

A campaign’s latent functions are not necessarily intended by the parties, but can result as a by-product of their campaign activities within the electorate. When processes of political communications begin to intensify in a society during an election campaign, interest in the campaign may be aroused among voters, and people accordingly become eager to search for information that helps them to make up their minds about how to vote. Once they are better informed, they understand better what is at stake at the upcoming election and what the choice set from which they can select looks like. Thereby they may become more motivated to cast a vote, and eventually gain enough information to be able to arrive at a decision about which party to choose.53

Figure 254 suggests that even the undramatic campaign of 2009 to some degree contributed to involving voters into the election process. From August interest in the campaign increased continuously. To a somewhat lower degree, the same holds for the perceived importance of the election result. At the same time voter intentions crystallised, so that the percentage of those unable to express a vote intention declined. During the last month of the campaign the percentage of undecided voters fell from a quarter to about 15 per cent. In particular the state elections on 30 August and the TV debate on 13 September may have helped voters to make up their minds. In addition, the willingness to go to the polls increased as election day drew closer.

![Figure 2: Mobilisation Effects of the Campaign (Means and %)](image-url)
The percentage of those voters who were highly likely, or even certain, to abstain decreased by half during the last seven weeks before election day.\textsuperscript{55}

An important precondition of the ability to decide between parties is the perception that from the voters’ point of view at least one party is able to solve the political problems facing a country at the time of an election. According to Figure 3 the share of those voters who had no confidence in any of the parties to deal with the most important issues decreased steadily during the campaign. Early in August, 30 per cent still considered no party capable of offering solutions for the country’s most important problem, but this percentage halved by shortly before polling day. This process of attitude change once again seems to have been boosted by the three state elections on 30 August, as well as the chancellor candidates’ TV debate. The parties’ campaigns may have been dull, but they nonetheless seem to have given voters some orientation, in particular during the final phase of the campaign. On the whole, it appears that despite its low-key character in terms of polarisation and affect, the 2009 campaign did indeed arouse some interest in the election among voters. To some degree, it contributed to their sense that this election was politically important, it stimulated them to go to the polls, and it assisted them in electoral decision-making.

\textit{Evaluations of parties}

While campaign effects such as these appear vitally important for a lively democracy, from the protagonists’ – i.e., the parties’ and their candidates’ – point of view the manifest functions of electioneering appear more immediately relevant: If they invest money, time and energy in their electioneering activities, their primary goal is not so much to contribute to voters’ interest in the campaign and their capacity to
make well-grounded decisions, but first and foremost to gain votes. Above all else, they are interested in influencing vote intentions as well as the attitudes and perceptions from which they are derived. One such precondition of voting decisions in favour of particular parties concerns the problem-solving capacity attributed to them. Figure 3 displays how electors perceived the parties during the run-up to the 2009 election. Obviously, the CDU/CSU was most often credited with the capacity to deal with the issues most important to people. During the entire campaign it lay far ahead of the other parties in that regard. However, at first only gradually, but by mid-September quite clearly the SPD caught up, although a sizeable gap from the CDU/CSU remained up until the end of the campaign. While at the beginning of the campaign the Social Democrats had been seen as the most competent party by less than 15 per cent of the voters, they managed to gain another 10 percentage points by election day. The TV debate once again might have played a role in the perceived problem-solving capacity of the Social Democrats, as the percentage of those confident that the SPD was the party most competent to solve Germany’s most urgent problem began to rise at about the time this event took place. The shares of the three small parties meanwhile remained relatively stable at a rather low level.

Figure 4 illustrates how the parties were generally evaluated by the voters during the campaign period (on scales ranging from –5 to +5). A remarkable division of the party system becomes apparent in this analysis. Whereas the CDU, CSU, SPD, FDP and the Greens on average were all assessed more or less positively and did not dramatically differ from each other, the Left Party clearly inhabited a separate realm in the perceptions of voters. Throughout the entire campaign its assessments were on average clearly negative. The slight improvement in its evaluations during the
The campaign did not substantially alter this picture. The CDU came off best in the general evaluation of parties, but assessments of the SPD clearly changed for the better during the campaign, so that in the end only a slight distance remained between the CDU and the SPD. The CSU was on average graded about one scale point less positively than its sister party. For most of the time the FDP and the Greens also obtained somewhat higher values than the CSU. Apart from a rise in popularity by the end of the campaign which included all parties, the evaluations of CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens displayed only marginal fluctuation over time.

**Evaluations of leading candidates**

As described above, most parties ran highly personalised campaigns which focused on their leading candidates. Similar to Figure 4, Figure 5 shows how electors assessed the parties’ top-ranking politicians during the campaign. Strikingly, only one candidate obtained clearly negative judgements – Oskar Lafontaine, the leading candidate of the Left Party. He was not evaluated quite as negatively as his party, but his scores remained stable over the entire campaign period. In contrast, the incumbent Chancellor and lead candidate of the Christian Democrats, Angela Merkel, obtained overall very favourable evaluations and appears as the most popular politician. Her challenger, Frank-Walter Steinmeier of the SPD, had been judged 1.5 scale points less positively than the incumbent at the beginning of the campaign. But his standing improved during the last five weeks before election day. As a consequence, the gap between Steinmeier and Merkel diminished. Remarkably, Federal Minister of Economic Affairs Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg (CSU) was initially assessed nearly as positively as his party’s chancellor candidate. But his reputation within the electorate eroded...
somewhat during the campaign. The lead candidates of the FDP and the Greens, Guido Westerwelle and Renate Künast, were graded rather indifferently; on average, and quite constantly, they scored barely above the scale’s midpoint of zero.

Almost by necessity, the chancellor candidates of the two large parties play a specific role during German federal election campaigns, because it is always clear that one of them is the future head of government. Whom did voters prefer for this office at the 2009 election (Figure 6)? Only a small percentage of the electors were unable to state a preference, and only one out of ten voters wanted neither Merkel nor Steinmeier as head of the next federal government. During the entire campaign period the race between the two competitors appeared quite lopsided. Similar to most previous Bundestag elections, the chancellor who sought re-election enjoyed a substantial ‘incumbency bonus’. Merkel was favoured by many more voters than her challenger, although voters’ preferences began to converge by the end of August. The TV debate on 13 September seems to have given Steinmeier an additional positive push. However, on the eve of election day Merkel still clearly led the race with a share of 55 per cent, while Steinmeier was only preferred by every third voter.

Assessments of coalition options

As the polls conveyed a hazy picture with regard to likely outcomes of the election (see Figure 1), the prospects for government formation were one of the most intensely discussed topics during the campaign. Many options were thematised, but only one of them was a genuine ‘pre-election coalition’ in terms of a cooperation explicitly preferred by all involved partners, namely the ‘Black–Yellow’ coalition, consisting of CDU/CSU and FDP. All alternative coalition scenarios that were conceivable if
these parties failed to attain the necessary majority either seemed unrealistic in view of the polls, such as a revival of the ‘Red–Green’ coalition consisting of the SPD and the Greens, or lacked the unanimous support of all parties needed for such cooperation. The latter applied to a possible continuation of the incumbent Grand Coalition, but also to the various notions of unorthodox, as yet (at the federal level) untried combinations of three parties, such as the ‘Jamaica’ coalition (CDU/CSU, FDP and Greens) or the ‘Traffic-light’ coalition (SPD, Greens and FDP), which in 2009 were discussed for the first time during a federal election campaign.

How did the voters evaluate the different coalition options? Figure 7 shows (again based on a scale ranging from −5 to +5) that electors considered most coalition scenarios as rather undesirable. Only two possible government alliances scored positively for most of the campaign period: the ‘Black–Yellow’ coalition and the Grand Coalition. Early in the campaign the prospect of a coalition of Christian Democrats and Liberals was assessed somewhat more favourably than a potential continuation of the Grand Coalition. About a month before polling day voters’ evaluations of these two coalition models converged, and by the end of the campaign the Grand Coalition scored slightly better than the ‘Black–Yellow’ alternative. The scenario of a ‘Red–Green’ coalition also became more popular, and on the eve of election day almost emerged on a par with the ‘Black–Yellow’ and the Grand Coalition. Overall, then, only those coalition options which were already well known to voters through actual experience at the federal level were rated favourably. All alternatives which had so far never been realised at the federal level, including a ‘Black–Green’ cooperation of CDU/CSU and Greens as well as all scenarios involving three parties (counting CDU and CSU as one party), were more or less clearly rejected by

![Figure 7: Coalition Preferences During the Campaign (Means)](image-url)
the electorate. This pattern was especially pronounced for the ‘Red–Red–Green’ coalition of SPD, Greens and Left Party.

As the discussion about possible future coalitions which to some extent also contained contradictory signals may well have appeared quite confusing to voters, it also seems important how they assessed the likelihood that the respective parties would be at all willing to form a coalition if the election result allowed for it. Obviously, voters had little (and immediately before election day even less) doubt that CDU/CSU and FDP would readily join forces to form a coalition government provided they together reached a sufficient majority (Figure 8; entries are means on a scale ranging from 1 = not at all likely to 4 = most likely). That the Social Democrats and the Greens would revitalise their former cooperation (which had lasted from 1998 to 2005) if the election result would allow for it, was also assessed as quite likely by many voters. All in all, then, electors seem to have interpreted the parties’ coalition preferences predominantly in terms of the traditional party blocs (CDU/CSU and FDP vs. SPD and Greens), even if the respective parties themselves did not send clear coalition signals of that kind, as was the case with SPD and Greens. In stark contrast, voters did not detect much willingness on the part of the parties to enter into any of the three-party coalitions which were quite intensely discussed during the 2009 campaign. This holds true even for the ‘Traffic-light’ coalition to which the Social Democrats officially aspired; obviously voters did not see this as a realistic option. Similarly, most electors did not consider a ‘Red–Red–Green’ alliance a conceivable outcome of the election. Remarkably, it was another scenario that voters found increasingly likely as the campaign progressed – a continuation of the Grand Coalition. As it seems, over time they found the CDU/CSU’s and SPD’s repudiation of this option less and less credible.

**FIGURE 8**

PERCEPTIONS OF COALITION SIGNALS DURING THE CAMPAIGN (MEANS)
Correspondingly, by the end of August, voters’ expectations about what government would actually be formed after the election began to change (Figure 9). At that time half of the electorate assumed the next government to be a cooperation of CDU/CSU and FDP, while only 20 per cent anticipated a continuation of the Grand Coalition. But up to election day these expectations shifted dramatically. At the end, only one-third expected an election victory for ‘Black–Yellow’, while a similar number of voters were convinced that the next government would again be formed by the large parties. With regard to the election outcome expected by voters, over the entire campaign period none of the many alternative coalition options discussed during the run-up to the election appeared relevant.

**Vote intentions**

While the parties fight for their votes, step by step electors arrive at their voting decisions. Party-related perceptions and attitudes like those discussed above, but also political predispositions and other factors influence this process of preference crystallisation. Figure 10 shows how vote intentions (second votes) developed over the campaign. It differs in several important respects from Figure 1 which presents the published results of polls. First of all, it is based on voters’ responses to questions about their intended behaviour at the upcoming election on 27 September and not at a hypothetical election on the next weekend (the so-called ‘Sunday question’ usually used by German polling institutes). Moreover, the analysis is organised in a way that allows for capturing the process of voters’ decision-making. Hence, although Figure 10 displays only preferences for one of the parties present in the national parliament, not only persons planning to vote for one of the other parties but also undecided...
voters as well as certain or likely non-voters (see Figure 2) are taken into account in the calculations of percentages. Accordingly the parties’ vote shares appear lower in Figure 10 than those reported by polls which try to assess the distribution of party votes without taking non-voters and undecided respondents into account. Thirdly, our data have not undergone any weighting or other transformation procedures of the kind used by commercial polling institutes to generate distributions of party preferences that resemble plausible election outcomes. Moreover, when inspecting findings it has to be kept in mind that the main goal of our analysis is to reflect the dynamics of public opinion, but not to mirror the exact distribution of public opinion on each single day of the campaign. As our data basis provides on average about 100 interviews per day (over a period of about two months), estimates for single days are necessarily affected by a relatively large random error. This also applies to the results displayed in Figure 10 for the days immediately preceding election day which therefore deviate somewhat from the pattern reflected in the actual result of the election as registered on 27 September 2009.

Obviously, the CDU/CSU was way ahead of the SPD over the entire pre-election period. To be sure, the SPD gained some additional support during the final phase of the campaign. But this improvement is a far cry from the catch-up race at the 2005 election which moved the seemingly hopelessly trailing Social Democrats to a position of parity with the CDU/CSU within just a few weeks. The CDU/CSU’s reservoir of voters appeared stable until early September, but thereafter its share of supporters eroded somewhat. Yet immediately before polling day the Christian Democrats were able to compensate for these losses. CDU/CSU and SPD, but also the Greens seemingly profited from undecided voters who made up their minds at the very last
moment of the campaign, thus boosting these parties’ shares of electoral support. The Left Party’s standing with the electorate also improved during the campaign, but rather gradually. The FDP enjoyed considerable and quite constant support during the entire campaign. A last-minute swing in favour of the Liberals, as observed in 2005, did not occur in 2009.

CONCLUSION

The German federal election on 27 September 2009 was preceded by a campaign that lacked drama. This election had several peculiarities. Not least was that throughout the entire campaign the two major competitors, CDU/CSU and SPD, were governing together in a Grand Coalition and – given the ongoing financial and economic crisis which had started one year before – had to deal jointly with enormous challenges in a constructive way right up until election day, which prevented a polarised campaign like the one at the previous election. The parties opted for rather non-confrontational campaign strategies which were more focused on leading candidates than on issues. To the degree that policy issues were addressed, they concerned rather the socio-economic dimension of political conflict, whereas cultural and life-style themes played at best a marginal role. Numerous polls were carried out during the campaign, but they carried no clear message with regard to likely election outcomes. Hence, one of the most intensely discussed campaign topics concerned the question of what the next government would look like. Only one obvious pre-election coalition emerged during the campaign: Both the CDU/CSU and the FDP emphasised their willingness to revitalise the ‘Black–Yellow’ coalition that had been voted out of office in 1998. But in light of the polls it appeared uncertain that they would gain enough votes to realise that aspiration. However, the strategic situation of Social Democrats and Greens was much more difficult. Given their standing in the polls it was clear that a revival of the ‘Red–Green’ coalition was a most unlikely event; against this background the SPD and Greens proved unable to come up with convincing scenarios of how they might be able to gain control of the next government. As a consequence, the possibility that the outcome of the election might enforce a continuation of the Grand Coalition became an important latent motive of the 2009 federal election campaign.

Although the conditions of party competition had changed fundamentally as a consequence of the outcome of the 2005 federal election, parties, and even more the voters continued to stick to well-known coalition models. Only collaborations with a record in national government were regarded favourably by voters. All variants of three-party coalitions that had been under discussion since the aftermath of the 2005 election, including the ‘Traffic-light’ coalition (unilaterally) propagated by the SPD, failed to attract support within the electorate. Rather unsurprisingly in view of the reserved position that the respective parties themselves had taken with regard to these options for government formation, such more or less exotic alliances obviously seemed undesirable to voters. In terms of electoral prospects only a ‘Black–Yellow’ coalition and a continuation of the Grand Coalition appeared realistic from the voters’ point of view.

Concerning the competition between the two major parties, the CDU/CSU in many respects had the edge over the SPD. Although the gap narrowed in some respects over
time, the Christian Democrats remained in the leading position right up until election day. Overall, the CDU/CSU was evaluated more favourably by voters than the SPD. In addition, more electors were confident in its problem-solving capacity, and its chancellor candidate Angela Merkel profited from a sizeable ‘incumbency bonus’ and was much more popular. Moreover, according to the impressions of newspaper readers and TV viewers the Christian Democrats were treated more favourable by the news media. Finally, it deserves mention that despite its low intensity, the 2009 campaign did not fail to trigger involvement and mobilisation effects among voters, and helped them in making up their minds about whom to choose.

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NOTES


17. See van Rinsum and Grill, ‘Valium-Wahlkampf der Kanzlerin’.


20. See Brett Schneider and Bachl, ‘Die Bundestagswahl 2009 und die Medien’.


23. See Pappi, ‘Regierungsbildung im deutschen Fünf-Parteiensystem’.


28. See Brett Schneider and Bachl, ‘Die Bundestagswahl 2009 und die Medien’.


30. See Debus, ‘Das letzte Wahlprogramm für die Bundestagswahl 2009’.


32. See Debus, ‘Das letzte Wahlprogramm für die Bundestagswahl 2009’.


36. See Debus, ‘Das letzte Wahlprogramm für die Bundestagswahl 2009’.

37. See Debus, ‘Das letzte Wahlprogramm für die Bundestagswahl 2009’.

38. See Brett Schneider and Bachl, ‘Die Bundestagswahl 2009 und die Medien’.


42. All data analyses reported in this article are based on a survey that was conducted as part of the ‘German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES)’ (see http://www.dgfw.eu/gles.php?lang=en). It is a Rolling Cross-Section Survey (RCS) with more than 6,000 respondents that was conducted by phone during the last two months before the 2009 Bundestag election. For a detailed description of these data see Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck, Thorsten Faas and Ansgar Wolsing, ‘Kampagnendynamik bei der Bundestagswahl 2009: die Rolling Cross-Section-Studie im Rahmen der “German Longitudinal Election Study” 2009’, MZES Working Paper 134, Mannheim: MZES 2010, available from http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/publications/wp/wp-134.pdf.
44. See Geese et al., ‘Berichterstattung zur Bundestagswahl 2009 aus Sicht der Zuschauer’.
49. See http://www.ivw.de
52. See Wlezien, ‘Election Campaigns’.
54. Figures 2 to 10 are based on the survey described in note 42. They utilize the fact that as a Rolling Cross-Section Survey (RCS) this dataset is uniquely suited to reveal the dynamics of public opinion during the campaign period. A random sample of more than 6,000 voters was interviewed over a period of two months before the election, with an average of about 100 interviews conducted on each day of the period of observation. These daily interviews were conducted in such a way that not only the entire sample, but also the interviews collected on each day constitute random samples from the universe of German citizens aged 18 and above. Since for the individual days of observation within RCS studies only relatively small numbers of cases are available, rather large random errors must be taken into account. Analyses directly generated from raw data thus tend to produce rather uneven distributions. Usage of smoothing procedures is therefore advisable in order to arrive at clear representations of the underlying trends in the data. The lines displayed in Figures 2 to 10 were generated using the nonparametric regression procedure (robust) LOWESS for this purpose, see William S. Cleveland, The Elements of Graphing Data, rev. edition (Murray Hill, NJ: AT&T Bell Labs, 1994); John Fox, Nonparametric Simple Regression: Smoothing Scatterplots (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000). All analyses are based on a bandwidth of 0.25. Since due to the complicated sampling design of RCS surveys interviews collected on the first days do not yet constitute proper random samples, all dynamic analyses presented in this article start only on 3 August. The data were weighted by education on a daily basis.
55. Due to the well-known phenomenon of over-reporting the actual percentage of non-voters is underestimated in our survey; see, e.g., Carol A. Cassel, ‘Overreporting and Electoral Participation Research’, American Politics Research 31 (2003), pp.81–92.
56. For the Greens and the Left Party, due to time constraints only one of the respective two lead candidates could be included in the survey.
61. Ibid.