

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, Hans Mathias Kepplinger, and Wolfgang Donsbach, *Kampa. Meinungsklima und Medienwirkung im Bundestagwahlkampf 1998* [Kampa. The Climate of Opinion and Media Effects in the Parliamentary Election Campaign 1998.] Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 1999, 288 pp., ISBN 34-95-47981-3.

The 1998 national election was the first time German voters threw one party out of power and elected the opposition. Prior to that, control of the Bundestag shifted as coalitions of parties changed, most recently when the small Liberal Party (FDP) moved from coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD) to coalition with the Conservative CDU/CSU in 1982. In a country where the usual description of government is 'stable' (or 'immovable'), 1998 was a watershed. The Green Party came into power with the SPD, and Helmut Kohl, who had reigned as chancellor for a record 16 years, slipped first into the unfamiliar role as leader of the political opposition, before falling into disgrace as disclosure of secret political contributions undermined his reputation as the father of German unification and European integration. The federal government's move back to Berlin after 50 years added to the sense that Germany had entered a new era.

How did it come about? In this book, whose title comes from the informal name of the campaign headquarters of the successful Social Democratic Party (SPD), a team of well-known German academic researchers addresses the question with a variety of arguments and data, notably a massive content analysis, a four-year panel, and a number of national surveys. The content analysis included more than 15,000 broadcast and print stories about the campaign; the panel began with more than 2,600 participants. The project was supported by a number of organizations, among them the Heinz Nixdorf Foundation, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and the Allensbach Foundation. The authors are familiar to WAPOR members. Noelle-Neumann is founder and director of the Institute for Public Opinion Research in Allensbach; Kepplinger teaches at the University of Mainz; Donsbach directs the new Institute for Communication Research at the University of Technology in Dresden. The book must set a record for academic publishing: it appeared less than a year after the election in September, 1998.

The book's nine chapters are written separately by the authors with help from a number of assistants and students. Diana von Webel, a student at Mainz begins (with Kepplinger and Marcus Maurer), with an overview of the SPD campaign. Donsbach (with Olaf Jandura and Antje Stehfest) addresses the 'Victory of Illusion' (a comparison of negative reporting about the German economy and employment with the more optimistic 'reality'). Kepplinger (with Maurer and Thomas Roessing) argues in a framing analysis that TV portrayal of German social conditions was overwhelmingly negative and—consistent with the original framing argument—assigned responsibility for solutions to the government. The three argue in the next chapter that TV presented the liberal SPD overwhelmingly positively and the conservative CDU/CSU overwhelmingly negatively. The two candidates themselves were presented less extremely but in the same directions. Donsbach and Jandura argue that the 'Americanization' of the campaign—and borrowing of tactics from Tony Blair's successful New Labour



campaign—led to an emphasis on personalities, campaign tactics, and destructive (negative) reporting.

Noelle-Neumann (with Thomas Petersen and Wilhelm Haumann) uses Allensbach polls to find evidence of a three-stage campaign leading to the SPD victory and rediscovers opinion leaders and the importance of personal communication. Kepplinger (with Maurer and Roessing), borrows from agenda-setting to argue that public attention shifted from foreign policy and the environment to unemployment and social security and that the SPD presented itself successfully as the party competent to deal with the new agenda while the CDU/CSU was left with the image of the party scrambling for political power. Donsbach and Petersen conclude the book with a chapter on methods and data sources.

Most of the substantive chapters summarize findings. The collective analysis incorporates ideas from the earliest days of systematic communication research to the latest. The old two-step flow is there, via opinion leadership, as are the venerable agenda-setting hypothesis and climate of opinion and the now-current framing. The data-collection effort is impressive; the analysis is simple although more complex interrogation of the data is promised. The book is admittedly a first look at the data and is addressed to a general audience. It attracted some attention when it was introduced at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1999.

The book is a mosaic of findings and interpretations rather than a systematic test of a single theory or single data set. However, a pattern emerges from the various analyses that serves as a unifying theme. The theme is introduced early with reference to the 'discovery' in the 1992 Bush—Clinton campaign—attributed to Gallup—that no twentieth-century American president had been thrown out of office when the economy was in an upswing. Reporting that consistently misrepresented the German economy, high unemployment and economic stagnation notwithstanding, is the key to explaining why a substantial number of voters switched from the CDU/CSU to the SPD. A second element of the broad theme is that while voters, in typical European parliamentary fashion, choose parties rather than individuals, campaign coverage focuses more and more on the personalities of the leading candidates rather than on party platforms, painting Kohl with responsibility for economic stagnation. A similar explanation could be applied to Clinton's victory on the heels of Bush's triumph in the Gulf War, although it should be remembered that the popular slogan, 'It's the economy, stupid!' came from the Clinton campaign, not the media. The degree to which the media create images, agendas, and frames independently of reality, candidates, and campaigns is still uncertain. A few political scientists even claim they can predict the outcome of a major election months in advance using only a set of economic indicators. To them, media coverage is irrelevant.

The 2000 presidential election in the United States and later national elections in the United Kingdom, among others, will be the next opportunity for the collective academic effort to sort out media influence on politics. What can researchers learn from *Kampa* the campaign and *Kampa* the book and the half-century research on which it builds? Three points could be kept in mind as academics crank up their studies and grant proposals.



The link between media content and people is still tenuous. Most of what people get out of the media is a product of what they bring to it; their ability to sort out information and fit it into a pattern of existing opinions and prejudices can override most nuances of reporting and even reality. A meticulous but detached content analysis may not reflect what readers, listeners, and viewers get out of the news.

Media effects are like sub-atomic particles. They are almost impossible to observe at the individual level, but at the larger collective level, tiny shifts by relatively small segments of a large population can produce substantial social change. On the other hand, media represent one of a large mix of factors that influence elections, and one that is probably rarely decisive. It was the economy, stupid, and a stagnant German economy, exploited skillfully by clever campaign organizations, and an inept political opposition, that probably led to the Clinton and Schröder (and probably Blair) victories, more than misleading or tendentious reporting. It is dangerous to speak of media influence on politics without 'probably' or 'possibly.'

The path of influence is never clear. Do media reflect opinion or create it? Or are both reporting and opinion a product of the same influences, some complex combination of reality and skillful spin-doctoring? When confounding factors are controlled, key relationships found in most middle-range theory fragments are weakened and often disappear. In time-series studies, the arrows are usually about as strong in both directions. Despite the caution about correlation and causation, studies rarely bring the key variables—media content and effect—together persuasively.

The authors acknowledge that even analysis of 15,000 campaign stories and thousands of survey and panel interviews do not answer all of the interesting questions about media influence in contemporary elections. It is probably good that *Kampa's* authors did not try to answer all of them. If they had, there would be no reason to saddle up and get ready for the next round of elections.

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